

CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

THE RANCHMAN

SQUARE DEAL SANDERSON

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THE SUNSET TRAIL
OMNIBUS

CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER'S
THE
SUNSET TRAIL
OMNIBUS

containing two complete novels

THE RANCHMAN
SQUARE DEAL SANDERSON

NEW YORK

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THE RANCHMAN

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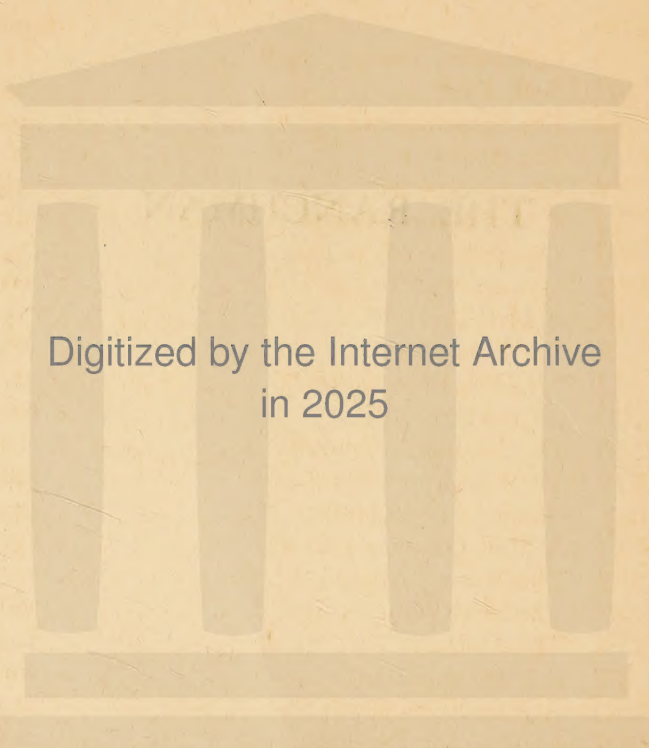
SQUARE DEAL SANDERSON

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THE RANCHMAN



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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I Concerning Dawes	I
II Slick Duds	14
III The Serpent Trail	20
IV The Hold-Up	26
V The Unexpected	36
VI A Man Makes Plans	51
VII The Shadow of the Past	59
VIII Concerning "Squint"	66
IX A Man Lies	75
X The Frame-Up	86
XI "No Fun Fooling Her"	91
XII Lifting the Mask	106
XIII The Shadow of Trouble	113
XIV The Face of a Fighter	128
XV Gloom — and Plans	142
XVI A Man Becomes a Brute	153
XVII The Wrong Ankle	172
XVIII The Beast Again	186
XIX The Ambush	193
XX A Fight to a Finish	200
XXI A Man Faces Death	212
XXII Looking for Trouble	218
XXIII A World-Old Longing	225
XXIV A Death Warrant	232
XXV Keats Looks for "Squint"	238
XXVI Keats Finds "Squint"	245
XXVII Besieged	254

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXXIII	The Fugitive	259
XXIX	The Captive	264
XXX	Parsons Has Human Instincts	270
XXXI	A Rescue	277
XXXII	Taylor Becomes Riled	284
XXXIII	Retribution	290
XXXIV	The Will of the Mob	304
XXXV	Triumph at Last	315

THE RANCHMAN

CHAPTER I

CONCERNING DAWES

THE air in the Pullman was hot and, despite the mechanical contrivances built into the coach to prevent such a contingency, the dust from the right-of-way persisted in filtering through crevices.

Even the electric fans futilely combated the heat; their droning hum bespoke terrific revolutions which did not materially lessen the discomfort of the occupants of the coach; and the dry, dead dust of the desert, the glare of a white-hot sun, the continuing panorama of waste land, rolling past the car windows, afforded not one cool vista to assuage the torture of travel.

For hours after leaving Kansas City, several of the passengers had diligently gazed out of the windows. But when they had passed the vast grass plains and had entered the desert, where their eyes met nothing but endless stretches of feathery alkali dust, beds of dead lava, and clumps of cacti with thorny spire and spatula blade defiantly upthrust as though in mockery of all

life—the passengers drew the shades and settled down in their seats to endure the discomfort of it all.

A *blasé* tourist forward reclined in one seat and rested his legs on another. From under the peak of a cap pulled well down over his eyes he smiled cynically at his fellow-passengers, noting the various manifestations of their discomfort. The tourist was a transcontinental traveler of note and he had few expectations. It amused him to watch those who had.

A girl of about twenty, seated midway in the coach to the left of the tourist, had been an intent watcher of the desert. With the covert eye of the tourist upon her she stiffened, stared sharply out of the window, then drew back, shuddering, a queer pallor on her face.

“She’s seen something unpleasant,” mused the tourist. “A heap of bleached bones—which would be the skeleton of a steer; or a rattlesnake—or most anything. She’s got nerves.”

One passenger in the car had no nerves—of that the tourist was convinced. The tourist had observed him closely, and the tourist was a judge of men. The nerveless one was a young man who sat in a rear seat staring intently out into the inferno of heat and sand, apparently absorbed in his thoughts and unaware of any physical discomfort.

“Young—about twenty-seven or twenty-eight—maybe thirty,” mused the tourist; “but an old-timer in

this country. I wised up to him when he got aboard at Kansas City. Been a miner in his time—or a cow-puncher. I'd hate to cross him."

Among the other passengers were two who attracted the attention of the tourist. They occupied the seat in front of the young man.

One of the two, who sat nearest the window, was not much older than the young man occupying the seat behind him. The tourist guessed his age to be around thirty-five or thirty-six. He was big, almost massive, and had lived well—as the slightly corpulent stomach revealed. Despite that, however, he was in good physical condition, for his cheeks glowed with good healthy color under the blue-black sheen of his fresh-shaved beard; there was a snapping twinkle in his black eyes, which were penetrating and steady; and there was a quiet confidence in his manner which told that he knew and appreciated himself. He was handsome in a heavy, sensuous fashion, and his coal-black hair, close-cropped and wavy, gave him an appearance of virility and importance that demanded a second look. The man seated beside him was undersized and ordinary-looking, with straight, iron-gray hair and a look of having taken orders all his life. The tourist set his age at fifty-five.

The girl was of the type that the tourist admired. He had seen her kind in the far corners of the world, on the thronged streets of cosmopolitan cities, in isolated sec-

tions of the world—the self-reliant, quietly confident American girl whose straight-in-the-eye glance always made a man feel impelled to respectfully remove his hat.

She was not beautiful, but she was undeniably good-looking. She was almost tall, and the ease and grace of her movements sufficed to convey to the tourist some conception of the symmetrical lines of her figure. If her features had been more regular, the girl would have been plain; but there was a slight uptilt to her nose that hinted of piquancy, denied by the quiet, steady eyes.

A brown mass of hair, which she had twisted into bulging coils and glistening waves, made the tourist wonder over her taste in that feminine art.

“She knows what becomes her,” he decided.

He knew the two men seated in front of the young man were traveling with her, for he had seen them together, with the older man patting her shoulder affectionately. But often she left them with their talk, which did not seem to interest her, while she withdrew to a distant seat to read or to gaze out of the window.

She had not seemed to notice either the man of colorless personality or the young man who occupied the seat behind her friends. If she had glanced at them at all it was with that impersonal interest one feels in the average traveler one meets anywhere.

But long ago—which, to be strictly accurate, was when

he had entered the coach at Kansas City — Quinton Taylor had been interested in her. He was content, though, to conceal that interest, and not once when she chanced to look toward him did she catch him looking at her.

Taylor knew he was no man to excite the interest of women, not even when he looked his best. And he knew that in his present raiment he did not look his best. He was highly uncomfortable.

For one thing, the white, starched collar he wore irritated him, choked him, reddening his face and bulging his eyes. The starched shirt had a pernicious habit of tightly sticking to him, the seams chafing his skin.

The ready-made suit he had bought at Kansas City was too small, and he could feel his shoulders bulging through the arms of the coat, while the trousers—at the hips and the knees—were stretched until he feared the cloth would not stand the strain.

The shoes were tight, and the derby hat—he glowered humorously at it in the rack above his head and gazed longingly at the suitcase at his feet, into which he had crammed the clothing he had discarded and which he had replaced at the suggestion of his banker in Kansas City. Cowboy rigging was not uncommon to Kansas City, the banker had told him, but still—well, if a man was wealthy, and wished to make an impression, it might be wise to make the change.

Not in years had Taylor worn civilized clothing, and

he was fully determined that before reaching his home town he would resume the clothing to which he was accustomed— and throw the new duds out of a window. He reddened over an imaginary picture of himself descending from the train in his newly acquired rigging to endure the humorous comments of his friends. Old Ben Mullarky, for instance, would think he had gone loco— and would tell him so. Yes, the new clothes were doomed; some ragged overland specimen of the genus “hobo” would probably find them or, if not, they would clutter up the right-of-way as the sad memento of a mistake he had made during a fit of momentary weakness.

As a matter of fact the girl had noticed Taylor. A girl will notice men, unconsciously. Sitting at her window even now, she was thinking of him.

She was not aware that she had studied him, or that she had even glanced at him. But despite her lack of interest in him she had a picture of him in mind, and her thoughts dwelt upon him.

She, too, had been aware that Taylor's clothes did not fit him. She had noticed the bulging shoulders, the tight trousers, the shoes, squeaking with newness, when once he had passed through the car to go out upon the platform. She had noticed him screwing his neck around in the collar; she had seen him hunch his shoulders intolerantly; she had seen that the trousers were too short;

that he looked like an awkward farmer or homesteader abroad on a pleasure trip, and decidedly uncomfortable in the unaccustomed attire.

She had giggled to herself, then. For Taylor did make a ridiculous figure. But later—when he had re-entered the car and she had looked fairly, though swiftly, at him as he advanced down the aisle—she had seen something about him that had impressed her. And that was what she was thinking about now. It was his face, she believed. It was red with self-consciousness and embarrassment, but she had seen and noted the strength of it—the lean, muscular jaw, the square, projecting chin, the firm, well-controlled mouth; the steady, steel-blue eyes, the broad forehead. It had seemed to her that he was humorously aware of the clothes, but that he was grimly determined to brazen the thing out.

Her mental picture now gave her the entire view of Taylor as he had come toward her. And she could see him in a different environment, in cowboy regalia, on a horse, perfectly at ease. He made a heroic figure. So real was the picture that she caught herself saying: “Clothes *do* make the man!” And then she smiled at her enthusiasm and looked out of the window.

Taylor had been thinking of her with the natural curiosity of the man who knows he has no chance and is not looking for one. But she had impressed him as resembling someone with whom he had been well ac-

quainted. For an hour he puzzled his brain in an endeavor to associate hers with some face of his recollection, but elusive memory resisted his demands on it with the result that he gave it up and leaned back as restfully as he could with the consciousness of the physical torture he was undergoing.

And then he heard the younger of the two men in front of him speak to the other:

"We'll make things hum in Dawes, once we get hold of the reins."

"But there will be obstacles, Carrington."

"Sure! Obstacles! Of course. That will make the thing all the more enjoyable."

There was a ring in Carrington's voice that struck a chord of sudden antagonism in Taylor, a note of cunning that acted upon Taylor instantly, as though the man had twanged discord somewhere in his nature.

Dawes was Taylor's home; he had extensive and varied interests there; he had been largely responsible for Dawes's growth and development; he had fought for the town and the interests of the town's citizens against the aggressions of the railroad company and a grasping land company that had succeeded in clouding the titles to every foot of land owned by Dawes's citizens—his own included.

And he had heard rumors of outside interests that were trying to gain a foothold in Dawes. He had paid

little attention to these rumors, for he knew that capital was always trying to drive wedges that would admit it to the golden opportunities afforded by new towns, and he had ascribed the rumors to idle gossip, being aware that such things are talked of by irresponsibles.

But the words, "Get hold of the reins," had a sound of craft and plotting. And there was something in Carrington's manner and appearance that suggested guile and smooth cunning. Seething with interest, Taylor closed his eyes and leaned his head back upon the cushion behind him, simulating sleep.

He felt Carrington turn; he could feel the man's eyes on him, and he knew that Carrington was speculating over him.

He heard the other man whisper, though he could not catch the words. However, he heard Carrington's answer:

"Don't be uneasy—I'm not 'spilling' anything. *He* wouldn't know the difference if I did. A homesteader hitting town for the first time in a year, probably. Did you notice him? Lord, what an outfit!"

He laughed discordantly, resuming in a whisper which carried to Taylor:

"As I was saying, we'll make things hum. The good folks in Dawes don't know it, but we've been framing them for quite a spell—been feeding them Danforth. You don't know Danforth, eh? He's quite a hit with

these rubes. Knows how to smear the soft stuff over them. He's what we call a 'mixer' back in Chicago. Been in Dawes for about a year, working in the dark. Been going strong during the past few months. Running for mayor now — election is today. It'll be over by the time we get there. He'll win, of course; he wired me it was a cinch. Cost a lot, though, but it's worth it. We'll own Dawes before we get through!"

It was with an effort that Taylor kept his eyes closed. He heard nothing further, for the man's voice had dropped lower and Taylor could not hear it above the roar of the train.

Still, he had heard enough to convince him that Carington had designs on the future welfare of Dawes, and his muscles swelled until the tight-fitting coat was in dire danger of bursting.

Danforth he knew slightly. He had always disliked and distrusted the man. He remembered Danforth's public *début* to the people of Dawes. It had been on the occasion of Dawes's first anniversary and some public-spirited citizens had decided upon a celebration. They had selected Danforth as the speaker of the day because of his eloquence — for Danforth had seized every opportunity to publicly air his vigorous voice, and Taylor had been compelled to acknowledge that Danforth was a forceful and able speaker.

Thereafter, Danforth's voice often found the public

ear. He was a lawyer, and the sign he had erected over the front of the frame building adjoining the courthouse was as magnificent as Danforth was eloquent.

But though Taylor had distrusted Danforth, he had found no evidence—until now—that the lawyer intended to betray his fellow-citizens. Before leaving Dawes the week before he had heard some talk, linking Danforth's name with politics, but he had discredited the talk. His own selection had been Neil Norton, and he had asked his friends to consider Norton.

Taylor listened intently, with the hope of hearing more of the conversation being carried on between the two men in front of him. But he heard no more on the subject broached by Carrington. Later, however, his eyes still closed, still pretending to be asleep, he saw through veiled eyelids the girl rise from her seat and come toward the two men in front of him.

For the first time he got a clear, full view of her face and a deep, disturbing emotion thrilled him. For now, looking fairly at her, he was more than ever convinced that he had seen her before, or that her resemblance to someone he had known was more startling than he had thought.

Then he heard Carrington speak to her.

"Getting tired, Miss Harlan?" said Carrington. "Well, it will soon be ended, now. One more night on the train—and then Dawes."

The older man laughed, and touched the girl's arm playfully. "You don't mind it, do you, Marion?"

The older man said more, but Taylor did not hear him. For at his mention of the girl's given name, so soon after Carrington's pronouncement of "Harlan," Taylor's eyes popped open, and he sat erect, staring straight at the girl.

Whether her gaze had been drawn by his, or whether her woman's curiosity had moved her to look at him, Taylor never knew. But she met his wide gaze fairly, and returned his stare with one equally wide. Only, he was certain, there was a glint of mocking accusation in her eyes—to remind him, he supposed, that she had caught him eavesdropping.

And then she smiled, looking at Carrington.

"One is recompensed for the inconveniences of travel by the interesting characters one chances to meet."

And she found opportunity, with Carrington looking full at her, to throw a swift, significant glance at Taylor.

Taylor flushed scarlet. Not, however, because of any embarrassment he felt over her words, but because at that instant was borne overwhelmingly upon him the knowledge that the girl, and the man, Carrington, who accompanied her—even the older man—were persons with whom Fate had insisted that he play—or fight. They were to choose. And that they had chosen to fight was apparent by the girl's glance, and by Carrington's words, "We'll own Dawes before we get through."

Taylor got up and went to the smoking-room, where he sat for a long time, staring out of the window, his eyes on the vast sea of sagebrush that stretched before him, his mental vision fixed on an earlier day and upon a tragedy that was linked with the three persons in the coach — who seemed desirous of antagonizing him.

CHAPTER II

SLICK DUDS

AFTER a time Taylor's lips wreathed into a smile. He searched in his pockets—he had transferred all his effects from the clothing in the suitcase to his present uncomfortable raiment—and produced a long, faded envelope in danger of imminent disintegration.

The smile faded from his lips as he drew out the contents of the envelope, and a certain grim pity filled his eyes. He read:

SQUINT:

That rock falling on me has fixed me. There is no use in me trying to fool myself. I'm going out. There's things a man can't say, even to a friend like you. So I'm writing this. You won't read it until after I'm gone, and then you can't tell me what you think of me for shoving this responsibility on you. But you'll accept, I know; you'll do it for me, won't you?

I've had a lot of trouble—family trouble. It wouldn't interest you. But it made me come West. Maybe I shouldn't have come. I don't know; but it seemed best.

You've been a mighty persevering friend, and I know you from the ground up. You never inquired about my past, but I know you've wondered. Once I mentioned my daughter, and I saw you look sharp at me. Yes, there is a daughter. Her name is Marion. There was a wife and her brother, Elam Parsons. But only Marion counts. The others were too selfish and sneaking.

You won't be interested in that. But I want Marion taken care of. She was fifteen when I saw her last. She looked just like me; thank God for that! She won't have any of the characteristics of the others!

Squint, I want you to take care of her. You'll find her in Westwood, Illinois. You and me have talked of selling the mine. Sell it; take my share and for it give Marion a half-interest in your ranch, the Arrow. If there is any left, put it in land in Dawes — that town is going to boom. Guard it for her, and marry her, Squint; she'll make you a good wife. Tell her I want her to marry you; she'll do it, for she always liked her "dad."

There was more, but Taylor read no further. He stuffed the envelope into a pocket and sat looking out of the window, regarding morosely the featureless landscape. After a time he grinned saturninely:

"Looks to me like a long chance, Larry," he mused. "Considered as a marrying proposition she don't seem to be enthusiastic over me. Now what in thunder is she doing out here, and why is that man Carrington with her—and where did she pick him up?"

There came no answer to these questions.

Reluctant, after the girl's mocking smile, to seem to intrude, Taylor sat in the smoking-compartment during the long afternoon, until the dusk began to descend—until through the curtains of the compartment he caught a glimpse of the girl and her companions returning from the dining-car. Then, after what he considered a decent interval, he emerged from the compartment, went to

the diner, ate heartily, and returned to the smoking-room.

He had met Larry Harlan about three years before. Harlan had appeared at the Arrow one morning, looking for a job. Taylor had hired him, not because he needed men, but because he thought Harlan needed work. A friendship had developed, and when one day Harlan had told Taylor about a mine he had discovered in the Sangre de Christo Mountains, some miles southwestward, offering Taylor a half-interest if the latter would help him get at the gold, Taylor had agreed.

They had found the mine, worked it, and had taken considerable gold out of it, when one day a huge rock had fallen on Harlan. Taylor had done what he could, rigging up a drag with which to take Harlan to town and a doctor, but Harlan had died before town could be reached.

That had been the extent of Taylor's friendship for the man. But he had followed Harlan's directions.

Sitting in the smoking-compartment, he again drew out Harlan's note to him and read further:

Marion will have considerable money, and I don't want no sneak to get hold of it — like the sneak that got hold of the money my wife had, that I saved. There's a lot of them around. If Marion is going to fall in love with one of that kind, I'd rather she wouldn't get what I leave — the man would get it away from her.

Use your own judgment, and I'll be satisfied.

It was not difficult for Taylor to divine what had happened to Harlan, nor was it difficult to understand that the man's distrust of other men amounted to an obsession. However, Taylor had no choice but to assume the trust and no course but to obey Harlan's wishes in the matter.

Taylor's trip eastward to Kansas City had been for the purpose of attending to his own financial interests, and incidentally to conclude the deal for the sale of the mine. He had deposited the money in his own name, but he intended—or had intended—after returning to the Arrow to make arrangements for his absence, to go to Westwood to find Marion Harlan. The presence of the girl on the train and the certain conviction that she was bound for Dawes made the trip to Westwood unnecessary.

For Taylor had no doubt that the girl was the daughter of Larry Harlan. That troublesome resemblance of hers to someone of his acquaintance bothered him no longer, for the girl was the living image of Larry Harlan.

Taylor had not anticipated the coming of Carrington into his scheme of things. For the first time since Larry Harlan's letter had come into his possession he realized that deep in his heart was a fugitive desire for the coming of the girl to the Arrow. He had liked Larry Harlan, and he had drawn mental pictures of what the daughter would be like; and, though she was not exactly as he had pictured her, she was near enough to the ideal he had

visualized. He wanted, now more than ever, to faithfully fulfil his obligation to Larry Harlan.

The presence of Carrington on the train, coupled with the inference that Carrington was a close friend of the girl's, irritated Taylor. For at the first glance he had felt a subtle antagonism for the man. Yet he was more disturbed over the mockery in the girl's eyes when she had looked directly at him when she had caught him listening to her talk with Carrington and the older man.

Still, Taylor was not the type of man who permits the imminence of discord to disturb his mental equanimity, and he grinned into the growing darkness of the plains with a grimly humorous twist to his lips that promised interesting developments should Carrington oppose him.

When he again looked out of the aperture in the curtains screening the smoking-compartment from the aisle he saw the porter pass, carrying bedclothing. Later he saw the porter returning, smilingly inspecting a bill. After an interval the porter stuck his head through the curtains and surveyed him with a flashing grin:

"Is you ready to retiah, boss?" he asked.

A quarter of an hour later Taylor was alone in his berth, gazing at his reflection in the glass while he undressed.

"You wouldn't have the nerve to think she is interested in you, would you—you homely son-of-a-gun?" he queried of his reflection. "Why, no, she ain't, of course," he added; "no woman could be interested in

you. You've been all day looking like a half-baked dude — and no woman is interested in dudes!"

Carefully removing the contents of the several pockets of the despised wearing apparel in which he had suffered for many days, he got into his nightclothes and rang for the porter. When the latter appeared with his huge grin, Taylor gave him the offensive clothing, bundled together to form a large ball.

"George," he said seriously, almost solemnly, "I'm tired of being a dude. Some day I may decide to be a dude; but not now. Take these duds and save them until I ask for them. If you offer them to me before I ask for them, I'll perforate you sure as hell!"

He produced a big Colt pistol from somewhere, and as the weapon glinted in the light the porter's eyes bulged and he backed away, gingerly holding the bundle of clothing.

"Yassir, boss — yassir! I shuah won't mention it till you does, boss!"

When the porter had gone, Taylor grinned into the glass.

"I sure have felt just what I looked," he said.

Then he got into his berth and dreamed all night of a girl whose mocking eyes seemed to say:

"Well, do you think you have profited by listening?"

"Why, sure," he retorted, in his dreams; "I've seen you, ain't I?"

CHAPTER III

THE SERPENT TRAIL

MARION HARLAN did not dream of Quinton Taylor, though her last waking thought was of him, and when she opened her eyes in the morning it was to see him as he had sat in the seat behind Carrington and her uncle, his eyes wide with interest, or astonishment—or some emotion that she could not define—looking directly at her.

She had been certain then, and still was certain that he had been feigning sleep, that he had been listening to the talk carried on between her uncle and Carrington.

Why had he listened?

That interrogation absorbed her thoughts as she dressed.

She had not meant to be interested in him, for she had, in her first glance at him, mentally decided that he was no more interesting than many another ill-dressed and uncouth westerner whom she had seen on the journey toward Dawes.

To be sure, she had seen signs of strength in him, mental and physical, but that had been when she looked at him coming toward her down the aisle. But even then

he had not interested her; her interest began when she noted his interest in the conversation of her traveling companions. And then she had noticed several things about him that had escaped her in other glances at him.

For one thing, despite the astonishment in his eyes, she had observed the cold keenness of them, the odd squint at the corners, where little wrinkles, splaying outward, indicated either deliberate impudence or concealed mirth. She was rather inclined to believe it the latter, though she would not have been surprised to discover the wrinkles to mean the former.

And then she had noted his mouth; his lips had been straight and firm; she had been sure they were set resolutely when she had surprised him looking at her. That had seemed to indicate that he had taken more than a passing interest in what he had overheard.

She speculated long over the incident, finally deciding that much would depend upon what he had overheard. There was only one way to determine that, and at breakfast in the dining-car she interrogated Carrington.

"Of course, you and uncle are going to Dawes on business, and I am merely tagging along to see if I can find any trace of my father. But have you any business secrets that might interest an eavesdropper? On a train, for instance—a train going toward Dawes?"

"What do you mean?" Carrington's eyes flashed as he leaned toward her.

"Have you and uncle talked business within hearing distance of a stranger?"

Carrington's face flushed; he exchanged a swift glance with the other man.

"You mean that clodhopper with the tight-fitting hand-me-down in the seat behind us—yesterday? He was asleep!"

"Then you did talk business—business secrets," smiled the girl. "I thought really big men commonly concealed their business secrets from the eager ears of outsiders."

She laughed aloud at Carrington's scowl, and then went on:

"I don't think the clodhopper was asleep. In fact, I rather think he was very wide awake. I wouldn't say for certain, but I *think* he was awake. You see, when I came back to talk with you he was sitting very straight, and his eyes were wide open.

"And I shall tell you something else," she went on. "During all the time he sat behind you, when you were talking, I watched him, he was pretending to sleep, for at times he opened his eyes and looked at you, and I am sure he was not thinking pleasant thoughts. And I don't believe he is a clodhopper. I think he amounts to something; and if you will look well at him you will see, too. When he was listening to you there was a look in his eyes that made me think of fighting." And then, after a momentary pause, she added slowly, "there isn't anything

wrong about the business you are going to transact out here—is there?”

“Wrong?” he laughed. “Oh, no! Business is business.” He leaned forward and gazed deliberately into her eyes, his own glowing significantly. “You don’t think, with me holding your good opinion—and always hoping to better it—that I would do anything to destroy it, Marion?”

The girl’s cheeks were suffused with faint color.

“You are assuming again, Mr. James J. Carrington. I don’t care for your subtle speeches. I like you best when you talk frankly; but I am not sure that I shall ever like you enough to marry you.”

She smiled at the scowl in his eyes, then looked speculatively at him. It should have been apparent to him that she had spoken the truth regarding her feeling for him.

The uncle knew she had spoken the truth, for she left them presently, and the car door had hardly closed behind her when Carrington said, smiling grimly:

“She’s a thoroughbred, Parsons. That’s why I like her. I’ll have her, too!”

“Careful,” grinned the other, smoothly. “If she ever discovers what a brute you are—” He made a gesture of finality.

“Brute! Bah! Parsons, you make me sick! I’ll take her when I want her! Why do you suppose I told her that

fairy tale about her father having been seen in this locality? To get her out here with me, of course — where there isn't a hell of a lot of law, and a man's will is the only thing that governs him. She won't have me, eh? Well, we'll see!"

Parsons smirked at the other. "Then you lied about Lawrence Harlan having been seen in this country?"

"Sure," admitted Carrington. "Why not?"

Parsons looked leeringly at Carrington. "Suppose I should tell her?"

Carrington glared at the older man. "You won't," he declared. "In the first place, you don't love her as an uncle should because she looks like Larry Harlan — and you hated Larry. Suppose I should tell her that you were the cause of the trouble between her parents; that you framed up on her mother, to get her to leave Larry? Why, you damned, two-faced gopher, she'd wither you!"

He grinned at the other and got up, turning, when he reached his feet, to see Quinton Taylor, standing beside a chair at the next table, just ready to sit down, but delaying to hear the remainder of the extraordinary conversation carried on between the two men.

Taylor had donned the garments he had discarded in Kansas City. A blue woolen shirt, open at the throat; corduroy trousers, the bottoms stuffed into the soft tops of high-heeled boots; a well-filled cartridge-belt, sagging at the right hip with the weight of a heavy pistol —

and a broad-brimmed felt hat, which a smiling waiter held for him—completed his attire.

Freshly shaved, his face glowed with the color that betokens perfect health; and just now his eyes were also glowing—but with frank disgust and dislike.

Carrington flushed darkly and stepped close to Taylor. Carrington's chin was thrust out belligerently; his eyes fairly danced with a rage that he could hardly restrain.

"Listening again, eh?" he said hoarsely. "You had your ears trained on us yesterday, in the Pullman, and now you are at it again. I've a notion to knock your damned head off!"

Taylor's eyelids flickered once, the little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepening a trifle. But his gaze was steady, and the blue of his eyes grew a trifle more steely.

"You've got a bigger notion not to, Mr. Man," he grinned. "You run a whole lot to talk."

He sat down, twisted around in the chair and faced the table, casting a humorous eye at the black waiter, and ignoring Carrington.

"I'll want a passable breakfast this morning, George," he said; "I'm powerful hungry."

He did not turn when Carrington went out, followed by Parsons.

The waiter hovered near him, grinning widely.

"I reckon you-all ain't none scary, boss!" he said, admiringly.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOLD-UP

AFTER breakfast — leaving a widely grinning waiter, who watched him admiringly — Taylor reentered the Pullman.

Stretching out in the upholstered seat, Taylor watched the flying landscape. But his thoughts were upon the two men he had overheard talking about the girl in the diner. Taylor made a grimace of disgust at the great world through which the train was speeding; and his feline grin when his thoughts dwelt definitely upon Carrington, indicated that the genial waiter had not erred greatly in saying Taylor was not “scary.”

Upon entering, Taylor had flashed a rapid glance into the car. He had seen Carrington and Parsons sitting together in one of the seats and, farther down, the girl, leaning back, was looking out of the window. Her back was toward Taylor. She had not seen him enter the car — and he was certain she had not seen him leave it to go to the diner. He had thought — as he had glanced at her as he went into the smoking-compartment — that, despite the girl's seemingly affectionate manner toward Parsons, and her cordial treatment of the big man, her

manner indicated the presence of a certain restraint. And as he looked toward her, he wondered if Parsons or the big man had told her anything of the conversation in the diner in which he himself figured.

And now, looking out of the window, he decided that even if the men had told her, she would not betray her knowledge to him—unless it were to give him another scornful glance—the kind she threw at him when she saw him as he sat behind the two men when they had been talking of Dawes. Taylor reddened and gritted his teeth impotently; for he knew that if the two men had told her anything, they would have informed her, merely, that they had again caught him listening to them. And for that double offense, Taylor knew there would be no pardon from her.

Half an hour later, while still thinking of the girl and the men, Taylor felt the train slowing down. Peering as far ahead as he could by pressing his face against the glass of the window, Taylor saw the train was entering a big cut between some hills. It was a wild section, with a heavy growth of timber skirting the hills—on Taylor's side of the train—and running at a sharp angle toward the right-of-way came a small river.

Taylor recognized the place as Toban's Siding. He did not know how the spot had come by its name; nor did he know much about it except that there was a spur of track and a water-tank. And when the train began

to slow down he supposed the engineer had decided to stop to take on water. He found himself wondering, though, why that should be necessary, for he was certain the train had stopped for water a few miles back, while he had been in the dining-car.

The train was already late, and Taylor grinned as he settled farther back in the seat and drew a sigh of resignation. There was no accounting for the whims of an engineer, he supposed.

He felt the train come to a jerking stop; and then fell a silence. An instant later the silence was broken by two sharp reports, a distinct interval between them. Taylor sat erect, the smile leaving his face, and his lips setting grimly as the word "Hold-up" came from between them.

Marion Harlan also heard the two reports. Stories of train robberies — recollections of travelers' tales recurred in her brain as she sat, for the first tense instant following the reports, listening for other sounds. Her face grew a little pale, and a tremor ran over her; but she did not feel a bit like screaming — though in all the stories she had ever read, women always yielded to the hysteria of that moment in which a train-robber makes his presence known.

She was not frightened, though she was just a trifle nervous, and more than a trifle curious. So she pressed her cheek against the window-glass and looked forward.

What she saw caused her to draw back again, her curiosity satisfied. For on the side of the cut near the engine,

she had seen a man with a rifle—a masked man, tall and rough-looking—and it seemed to her that the weapon in his hands was menacing someone in the engine-cab.

She stiffened, looking quickly around the car. None of the passengers had moved. Carrington and Parsons were still sitting together in the seat. They were sitting erect, though, and she saw they, too, were curious. More, she saw that both men were pale, and that Carrington, the instant she turned, became active—bending over, apparently trying to hide something under a seat. That movement on Carrington's part was convincing, and the girl drew a deep breath.

While she was debating the wisdom of permitting her curiosity to drive her to the door nearest her to determine what had happened, the door burst open and a masked man appeared in the opening!

While she stared at him, he uttered the short, terse command:

“Hands up!”

She supposed that meant her, as well as the men in the car, and she complied, though with a resentful glare at the mask.

Daringly she turned her head and glanced back. Carrington had his hands up, too; and Parsons—and the tourist, and the other man. She did not see Taylor—though she wondered, on the instant, if he, too, would obey the train-robber's command.

She decided he would—any other course would have been foolhardy; though she could not help remembering that queer gleam in Taylor's eyes. That gleam, it had seemed to her, was a reflection of—not foolhardiness, but of sheer courage.

However, she had little time to speculate. The masked man advanced, a heavy gun in his right hand, its muzzle moving from side to side, menacing them all.

He halted when he had advanced to within a step of the girl.

"You guys set tight!" he ordered gruffly—in the manner of the train-robber of romance. "If you go to lettin' down your sky-hooks one little quiver, I bore you so fast an' plenty that you'll think you're a colander!" Then he turned the mask toward the girl; she could feel his eyes burning through it.

"Shell out, lady!" he commanded.

She stared straight back at the eye-slits in the mask, defiance glinting her own eyes.

"I haven't any money—or anything of value—to give you," she returned.

"You've got a pocketbook there—in your hand!" he said. "Fork it over!" He removed his hat, held it in his left hand, and extended it toward her. "Toss it in there!"

Hesitatingly, she obeyed, though not without a vindictive satisfaction in knowing that he would find little

in the purse to compensate him for his trouble. She could see his eyes gleam greedily as he still looked at her.

"Now that chain an' locket you've got around your neck!" he ordered. "Quick!" he added, savagely, as she stiffened and glared at him.

She did as she was bidden, though; for she had no doubt he would kill her—at least his manner indicated he would. And so she removed it, held it lingering in her hand for an instant, and then tossed it into the hat. She gulped as she did so, for the trinket had been given to her by her father before he left home to go on that pilgrimage from which he had never returned.

"That's all, eh?" snarled the man. "Well, I ain't swallowin' that! I'm goin' to search you!"

She believed she must have screamed at that. She knew she stood up, prepared to fight him if he attempted to carry out his threat; and once on her feet she looked backward.

Neither Carrington nor Parsons had moved—they were palely silent, watching, not offering to interfere. As for that, she knew that any sign of interference on the part of her friends would result in their instant death. But she did not know what they *should* do! Something must be done, for she could not permit the indignity the man threatened!

Still looking backward, she saw Taylor standing at the end of the car—where the partition of the smoking-

compartment extended outward. He held a gun in each hand. He had heard her scream, and on his face as the girl turned toward him, she saw a mirthless grin that made her shiver. She believed it must have been her gasp that caused the train-robber to look swiftly at Taylor.

Whatever had caused the man to look toward the rear of the car, he saw Taylor; and the girl saw him stiffen as his pistol roared in her ears. Taylor's pistols crashed at the same instant — twice — the reports almost together. Afterward she could not have told what surprised her the most — seeing the man at her side drop his pistol and lurch limply against a corner of the seat opposite her, and from there slide gently to the floor, grunting; or the spectacle of Taylor, arrayed in cowboy garb, emerging from the door of the smoking-compartment, the mirthless smile on his face, and his guns — he had used both — blazing forth death to the man who had threatened her.

Nor could she — afterward — have related what followed the sudden termination of the incident in the car. Salient memories stood out — the vivid and tragic recollection of chief incidents that occurred immediately; but she could not have even guessed how they happened.

She saw Taylor as he stood for an instant looking down at the man after he came running forward to where the other lay; and she saw Taylor leap for the front door of the car, vanish through it, and slam it after him.

For an instant after that there was silence, during

which she shuddered as she tried to keep her gaze from the thing that lay doubled oddly in the aisle.

And then she heard more shooting. It came from the direction of the engine—the staccato crashing of pistols; the shouts of men, their voices raised in anger.

Pressing her cheek against the window-pane, and looking forward toward the engine, she saw Taylor. With a gun in each hand, he was running down the little level between the track and the steep wall of the cut, toward her. She noted that his face still wore the mirthless grin that had been on it when he shot the train-robber in the car; though his eyes were alight with the lust of battle—that was all too plain—and she shivered. For Taylor, having killed one man, and grimly pursuing others, seemed to suggest the spirit of this grim, rugged country—the threat of death that seemed to linger on every hand.

She saw him snap a shot as he ran, bending far over to send the bullet under the car; she heard a pistol crash from the other side of the car; and then she saw Taylor go to his knees.

She gasped with horror and held to the window-sill, for she feared Taylor had been killed. But almost instantly she saw her error, for Taylor was on his hands and knees crawling when she could again concentrate her gaze; and she knew he was crawling under the car to catch the man who had shot from the other side.

Then Taylor disappeared, and she did not see him for a time. She heard shots, though; many of them; and then, after a great while, a silence. And during the silence she sat very still, her face white and her lips stiff, waiting.

The silence seemed to endure for an age; and then it was broken by the sound of voices, the opening of the door of the car, and the appearance of Taylor and some other men—several members of the train-crew; the express-messenger; the engineer, his right arm hanging limply—and two men, preceding the others, their hands bound, their faces sullen.

On Taylor's face was the grin that had been on it all along. The girl wondered at the man's marvelous self-control—for certainly during those moments of excitement and danger he must have been aware of the terrible risk he had been running. And then the thought struck her—she had not considered that phase of the situation before—that she *must* have screamed; that he had heard her, and had emerged from the smoking-room to protect her. She blushed, gratitude and a riot of other emotions overwhelming her, so that she leaned weakly back in the seat, succumbing to the inevitable reaction.

She did not look at Taylor again; she did not even see him as he walked toward the rear of the car, followed by the train-crew, and preceded by the two train-robbers he had captured.

But as the train-crew passed her, she heard one of them say :

“That guy’s a whirlwind with a gun! Didn’t do no hesitatin’, did he?”

And again :

“Now, what do you suppose would make a guy jump in that way an’ run a chance of gettin’ plugged—plenty? Do you reckon he was just yearnin’ fer trouble, or do you reckon they was somethin’ else behind it?”

The girl might have answered, but she did not. She sat very still, comparing Carrington with this man who had plunged instantly into a desperate gun-fight to protect her. And she knew that Carrington would not have done as Taylor had done. And had Carrington seen her face just at that moment he would have understood that there was no possibility of him ever achieving the success of which he had dreamed.

She heard one of the men say that the two men were to be placed in the baggage-car until they reached Dawes; and then Carrington and Parsons came to where she sat.

They talked, but the girl did not hear them, for her thoughts were on the picture Taylor made when he appeared at the door of the smoking-compartment arrayed in his cowboy rigging, the grim smile on his face, his guns flaming death to the man who thought to take advantage of her helplessness.

CHAPTER V

THE UNEXPECTED

THE train pulled out again presently, and the water-tank and the cut were rapidly left in the rear. Taylor returned to the smoking-room and resumed his seat, and while the girl looked out of the window, some men of the train-crew removed the body of the train-robber and obliterated all traces of the fight. And Carrington and Parsons, noting the girl's abstractedness, again left her to herself.

It had been the girl's first glimpse of a man in cowboy raiment, and, as she reflected, she knew she might have known Taylor was an unusual man. However, she knew it now.

Cursory glances at drawings she had seen made her familiar with the type, but the cowboys of those drawings had been magnificently arrayed in leather *chaparajos*, usually fringed with spangles; and with long-roweled spurs; magnificent wide brims—also bespangled, and various other articles of personal adornment, bewildering and awe inspiring.

But this man, though undoubtedly a cow-puncher, was minus the magnificent raiment of the drawings. And,

paradoxical as it may seem, the absence of any magnificent trappings made *him* seem magnificent.

But she was not so sure that it was the lack of those things that gave her that impression. He did not *bulge* in his cowboy clothing; it fitted him perfectly. She was sure it was he who gave magnificence to the clothing. Anyway, she was certain he was magnificent, and her eyes glowed. She knew, now that she had seen him in clothing to which he was accustomed, and which he knew how to wear, that she would have been more interested in him yesterday had he appeared before her arrayed as he was at this moment.

He had shown himself capable, self-reliant, confident. She would have given him her entire admiration had it not been for the knowledge that she had caught him eavesdropping. That action had almost damned him in her estimation—it would have completely and irrevocably condemned him had it not been for her recollection of the stern, almost savage interest she had seen in his eyes while he had been listening to Carrington and Parsons.

She knew because of that expression that Carrington and Parsons had been discussing something in which he took a personal interest. She had not said so much to Carrington, but her instinct told her, warned her, gave her a presentiment of impending trouble. That was what she had meant when she had told Carrington she had seen *fighting* in Taylor's eyes.

Taylor confined himself to the smoking-compartment. The negro porter, with pleasing memories of generous tips and a grimmer memory to exact his worship, hung around him, eager to serve him, and to engage him in conversation; once he grinningly mentioned the incident of the cast-off clothing of the night before.

"I ain't mentionin' it, boss — not at all! I ain't givin' you them duds till you ast for them. You done took me by s'prise, boss—you shuah did. I might' near caved when you shoved that gun under ma nose—I shuah did, boss. I don't want to have nothin' to do with your gun, boss—I shuah don't. She'd go 'pop,' an' I wouldn't be heah no more!

"I didn't reco'nize you in them heathen clo's you had on yesterday, boss; but I minds you with them duds on. I knows you; you're 'Squint' Taylor, of Dawes. I've seen you on that big black hoss of yourn, a prancin' an' a prancin' through town—more'n once I've seen you. But I didn't know you in them heathen clo's yesterday, boss—'deed I didn't!"

Later the porter slipped into the compartment. For a minute or two he fussed around the room, setting things to order, meanwhile chuckling to himself. Occasionally he would cease his activities long enough to slap a knee with the palm of a hand, with which movement he would seem to be convulsed with merriment, and then he would resume work, chuckling audibly.

For a time Taylor took no notice of his antics, but they assailed his consciousness presently, and finally he asked:

“What’s eating you, George?”

The query was evidently just what “George” had been waiting for. For now he turned and looked at Taylor, his face solemn, but a white gleam of mirth in his eyes belying the solemnity.

“Tips is comin’ easy for George this mornin’,” he said; “they shuah is. No trouble at all. If a man wants to get tips all he has to be is a dictionary—he, he, he!”

“So you’re a dictionary, eh? Well, explain the meaning of this.” And he tossed a silver dollar to the other.

The dollar in hand, George tilted his head sidewise at Taylor.

“How on earth you know I got somethin’ to tell you?”

“How do I know I’ve got two hands?”

“By lookin’ at them, boss.”

“Well, that’s how I know you’ve got something to tell me—by looking at you.”

The porter chuckled. “I reckon it’s worth a dollar to have a young lady interested in you,” he told himself in a confidential voice, without looking at Taylor; “yas-sir, it’s sure worth a dollar.” He slapped his knee delightedly. “That young lady a heap interested in you, ’pears like. While ago she pens me in a corner of the platform. ‘Porter, who’s that man in the smoking-compartment—that cowboy? What’s his name, an’ where

does he live?' I hesitates, 'cause I didn't want to betray no secrets—an' scratch my haid. Then she pop half a dollar in my hand, an' I tole her you are Squint Taylor, an' that you own the Arrow ranch, not far from Dawes. An' she thank me an' go away, grinnin'."

"And the young lady, George; do you know her name?"

"Them men she's travelin' with calls her Marion, boss."

He peered intently at Taylor for signs of interest. He saw no such signs, and after a while, noting that Taylor seemed preoccupied, and was evidently no longer aware of his presence, he slipped out noiselessly.

At nine thirty, Taylor, looking out of the car window, noted that the country was growing familiar. Fifteen minutes later the porter stuck his head in between the curtains, saw that Taylor was still absorbed, and withdrew. At nine fifty-five the porter entered the compartment.

"We'll be in Dawes in five minutes, boss," he said. "I've toted your baggage to the door."

The porter withdrew, and a little later Taylor got up and went out into the aisle. At the far end of the car, near the door, he saw Marion Harlan, Parsons, and Carrington.

He did not want to meet them again after what had occurred in the diner, and he cast a glance toward the door behind him, hoping that the porter had carried his

baggage to that end of the car. But the platform was empty—his suitcase was at the other end.

He slipped into a seat on the side of the train that would presently disclose to him a view of Dawes's depot, and of Dawes itself, leaned an elbow on the window-sill, and waited. Apparently the three persons at the other end of the car paid no attention to him, but glancing sidelong once he saw the girl throw an interested glance at him.

And then the air-brakes hissed; he felt the train slowing down, and he got up and walked slowly toward the girl and her companions. At about the same instant she and the others began to move toward the door; so that when the train came to a stop they were on the car platform by the time Taylor reached the door. And by the time he stepped out upon the car platform the girl and her friends were on the station platform, their baggage piled at their feet.

Dawes's depot was merely a roofless platform; and there was no shelter from the glaring white sun that flooded it. The change from the subdued light of the coach to the shimmering, blinding glare of the sun on the wooden planks of the platform affected Taylor's eyes, and he was forced to look downward as he alighted. And then, not looking up, he went to the baggage-car and pulled his two prisoners out.

Looking up as he walked down the platform with the two men, he saw a transformed Dawes.

The little, frame station building had been a red, dingy blot beside the glistening rails that paralleled the town. It was now gaily draped with bunting—red, white, and blue—which he recognized as having been used on the occasion of the town's anniversary celebration.

A big American flag topped the ridge of the station; other flags projected from various angles of the frame.

Most of the town's other buildings were replicas of the station in the matter of decorations—festoons of bunting ran here and there from building to building; broad bands of it were stretched across the fronts of other buildings; gay loops of it crossed the street, suspended to form triumphal arches; flags, wreaths of laurel, Japanese lanterns, and other paraphernalia of the decorator's art were everywhere.

Down the street near the Castle Hotel, Taylor saw transparencies, but he could not make out the words on them.

He grinned, for certainly the victor of yesterday's election was outdoing himself.

He looked into the face of a man who stood near him on the platform—who answered his grin.

"Our new mayor is celebrating in style, eh?" he said.

"Right!" declared the man.

He was about to ask the man which candidate had been victorious—though he was certain it was Neil Norton—

when he saw Marion Harlan, standing a little distance from him, smiling at him.

It was a broad, impersonal smile, such as one citizen of a town might exchange with another when both are confronted with the visible evidences of political victory; and Taylor responded to it with one equally impersonal. Whereat the girl's smile faded, and her gaze, still upon Taylor, became speculative. Its quality told Taylor that he should not presume upon the smile.

Taylor had no intention of presuming anything. Not even the porter's story of the girl's interest in him had affected him to the extent of fatuous imaginings. A woman's curiosity, he supposed, had led her to inquire about him. He expected she rarely saw men arrayed as he was — and as he had been arrayed the day before.

The girl's gaze went from Taylor to the street in the immediate vicinity of the station, and for the first time since alighting on the platform Taylor saw a mass of people near him.

Looking sharply at them, he saw many faces in the mass that he knew. They all seemed to be looking at him and, with the suddenness of a stroke came to him the consciousness that there was no sound — that silence, deep and unusual, reigned in Dawes. The train, usually merely stopping at the station and then resuming its trip, was still standing motionless behind him. With a sidelong glance he saw the train-crew standing near the steps of

the cars, looking at him. The porter and the waiter with whose faces he was familiar, were grinning at him.

Taylor felt that his own grin, as he gazed around at the faces that were all turned toward him, was vacuous and foolish. He *felt* foolish. For he knew something had attracted the attention of all these people to him, and he had not the slightest idea what it was. For an instant he feared that through some mental lapse he had forgotten to remove his "dude" clothing; and he looked down at his trousers and felt of his shirt, to reassure himself. And he gravely and intently looked at his prisoners, wondering if by any chance some practical joker of the town had arranged the train robbery for his special benefit. If that were the explanation it had been grim hoax—for two men had been killed in the fight.

Looking up again, he saw that the grins on the faces of the people around him had grown broader—and several loud guffaws of laughter reached his ears. He looked at Marion Harlan, and saw a puzzled expression on her face. Carrington, too, was looking at him, and Parsons, whose smile was a smirk of perplexity.

Taylor reddened with embarrassment. A resentment that grew swiftly to an angry intolerance, seized him. He straightened, squared his shoulders, thrust out his chin, and shoving his prisoners before him, took several long strides across the station platform.

This movement brought him close to Marion Harlan

and her friends, and his further progress was barred by a man who placed a hand against his chest.

This man, too, was grinning. He seized Taylor's shoulders with both hands and looked into his face, the grin on his own broad and expanding.

"Welcome home—you old son-of-a-gun!" said the man.

His grin was infectious and Taylor answered it, dropping his suitcase and looking the other straight in the eyes.

"Norton," he said, "what in hell is the cause of all this staring at me? Can't a man leave town for a few days and come back without everybody looking at him as though he were a curiosity?"

Norton—a tall, slender, sinewy man with broad shoulders—laughed aloud and deliberately winked at several interested citizens who had followed Taylor's progress across the platform, and who now stood near him, grinning.

"You are a curiosity, man. You're the first mayor of this man's town! Lordy," he said to the surrounding faces, "he hasn't tumbled to it yet!"

The color left Taylor's face; he stared hard at Norton; he gazed in bewilderment at the faces near him.

"Mayor?" he said. "Why, good Lord, man, I wasn't here yesterday!"

"But your friends were!" yelled the delighted Norton.

He raised his voice, so that it reached far into the crowd on the street:

"He's sort of fussed up, boys; this honor being conferred on him so sudden; but give him time and he'll talk your heads off!" He leaned over to Taylor and whispered in his ear.

"Grin, man, for God's sake! Don't stand there like a wooden man; they'll think you don't appreciate it! It's the first time I ever saw you lose your nerve. Buck up, man; why, they simply swamped Danforth; wiped him clean off the map!"

Norton was whispering more into Taylor's ear, but Taylor could not follow the sequence of it, nor get a coherent meaning out of it. He even doubted that he heard Norton. He straightened, and looked around at the crowd that now was pressing in on him, and for the first time in his life he knew the mental panic and the physical sickness that overtakes the man who for the first time faces an audience whose eyes are focused on him.

For a bag of gold as big as the mountains that loomed over the distant southern horizon he could not have said a word to the crowd. But he did succeed in grinning at the faces around him, and at that the crowd yelled.

And just before the crowd closed in on him and he began to shake hands with his delighted supporters, he glanced at Marion Harlan. She was looking at him with

a certain sober interest, though he was sure that back in her eyes was a sort of humorous malice—which had, however, a softening quality of admiration and, perhaps, gratitude.

His gaze went from her to Carrington. The big man was watching him with a veiled sneer which, when he met Taylor's eyes, grew open and unmistakable.

Taylor grinned broadly at him, for now it occurred to him that he would be able to thwart Carrington's designs of "getting hold of the reins." His grin at Carrington was a silent challenge, and so the other interpreted it, for his sneer grew positively venomous.

The girl caught the exchange of glances between them, for Taylor heard her say to Parsons, just before the noise of the crowd drowned her voice:

"Now I *know* he overheard you!"

Meanwhile, the two prisoners were standing near Taylor. Taylor had almost forgotten them. He was reminded of their presence when he saw Keats, the sheriff, standing near him. At just the instant Taylor looked at Keats, the latter was critically watching the prisoners.

Keats and Taylor had had many differences of opinion, for the sheriff's official actions had not merited nor received Taylor's approval. Taylor's attitude toward the man had always been that of good-natured banter, despite the disgust he felt for the man. And now, pursuing his customary attitude, Taylor called to him:

"Specimens, eh! Picked them up at Toban's this morning. They yearned to hold up the train. There were four, all together, but we had to put two out of business. I came pretty near forgetting them. If I hadn't seen you just now, maybe I would have walked right off and left them here. Take them to jail, Keats."

Keats advanced. He met Taylor's eyes and his lips curved with a sneer:

"Pullin' off a little grand-stand play, eh! Well, it's a mighty clever idea. First you get elected mayor, an' then you come in here, draggin' along a couple of mean-lookin' hombres, an' say they've tried to hold up the train at Toban's. It sounds mighty fishy to me!"

Taylor laughed. He heard a chuckle behind him, and he turned, to see Carrington grinning significantly at Keats. Taylor's eyes chilled as his gaze went from one man to the other, for the exchange of glances told him that between the men there was a common interest, which would link them together against him. And in the dead silence that followed Keats's words, Taylor drawled, grinning coldly:

"Meaning that I'm a liar, Keats?"

His voice was gentle, and his shoulders seemed to droop a little as though in his mind was a desire to placate Keats. But there were men in Dawes who had seen Taylor work his guns, and these held their breath and began to shove backward. That slow, drooping of

Taylor's shoulders was a danger signal, a silent warning that Taylor was ready for action, swift and violent.

And faces around Taylor whitened as the man stood there facing Keats, his shoulders drooping still lower, the smile on his face becoming one of cold, grim mockery.

The discomfiture of Keats was apparent. Indecision and fear were in the set of his head—bowed a little; and a dread reluctance was in his shifting eyes and the pasty-white color of his face. It was plain that Keats had overplayed; he had not intended to arouse the latent tiger in Taylor; he had meant merely to embarrass him.

"Meaning that I'm a liar, Keats?"

Again Taylor's voice was gentle, though this time it carried a subtle taunt.

Desperately harried, Keats licked his hot lips and cast a sullen glance around at the crowd. Then his gaze went to Taylor's face, and he drew a slow breath.

"I reckon I wasn't meanin' just that," he said.

"Of course," smiled Taylor; "that's no way for a sheriff to act. Take them in, Keats," he added, waving a hand at the prisoners; "it's been so long since the sheriff of this county arrested a man that the jail's gettin' tired, yawning for somebody to get into it."

He turned his back on Keats and looked straight at Carrington:

"Have you got any ideas along the sheriff's line?" he asked.

Carrington flushed and his lips went into a sullen pout. He did not speak, merely shaking his head, negatively.

Keats's glance at Taylor was malignant with hate; and Carrington's sullen, venomous look was not unnoticed by the crowd. Keats stepped forward and seized the two prisoners, hustling them away, muttering profanely.

And then Taylor was led away by Norton and a committee of citizens, leaving Carrington, the girl and Parsons alone on the platform.

"Looks like we're going to have trouble lining things up," remarked Parsons. "Danforth——"

"You shut up!" snapped Carrington. "Danforth's an ass and so are you!"

CHAPTER VI

A MAN MAKES PLANS

WITHIN an hour after his arrival in Dawes, Carrington was sitting in the big front room of his suite in the Castle Hotel, inspecting the town.

A bay window projected over the sidewalk, and from a big leather chair placed almost in the center of the bay between two windows and facing a third, at the front, Carrington had a remarkably good view of the town.

Dawes was a thriving center of activity, with reasons for its prosperity. Walking toward the Castle from the railroad station, Carrington had caught a glimpse of the big dam blocking the constricted neck of a wide basin west of the town—and farther westward stretched a vast agricultural section, level as a floor, with a carpet of green slumbering in the white sunlight, and dotted with young trees that seemed almost ready to bear.

There were many small buildings on the big level, some tenthouses, and straight through the level was a wide, sparkling stream of water, with other and smaller streams intersecting it. These streams were irrigation ditches, and the moisture in them was giving life to a vast section of country that had previously been arid and dead.

But Carrington's interest had not been so much for the land as for the method of irrigation. To be sure, he had not stopped long to look, but he had comprehended the system at a glance. There were locks and flumes and water-gates, and plenty of water. But the irrigation company had not completed its system. Carrington intended to complete it.

Dawes was two years old, and it had the appearance of having been hastily constructed. Its buildings were mostly of frame—even the Castle, large and pretentious, and the town's aristocrat of hostelries, was of frame. Carrington smiled, for later, when he had got himself established, he intended to introduce an innovation in building material.

The courthouse was a frame structure. It was directly across the street from the Castle, and Carrington could look into its windows and see some men at work inside at desks. He had no interest in the post office, for that was of the national government—and yet, perhaps, after a while he might take some interest in that.

For Carrington's vision, though selfish, was broad. A multitude of men of the Carrington type have taken bold positions in the eternal battle for progress, and all have contributed something toward the ultimate ideal. And not all have been scoundrels.

Carrington's vision, however, was blurred by the mote of greed. Dawes was flourishing; he intended to mod-

ernize it, but in the process of modernization he intended to be the chief recipient of the material profits.

Carrington had washed, shaved himself, and changed his clothes; and as he sat in the big leather chair in the bay, overlooking the street, he looked smooth, sleek, and capable.

He had seemed massive in the Pullman, wearing a traveling suit of some light material, and his corpulent waist-line had been somewhat accentuated.

The blue serge suit he wore now made a startling change in his appearance. It made his shoulders seem broader; it made the wide, swelling arch of his chest more pronounced, and in inverse ratio it contracted the corpulent waist-line—almost eliminating it.

Carrington looked to be what he was—a big, virile, magnetic giant of a man in perfect health.

He had not been sitting in the leather chair for more than fifteen minutes when there came a knock on a door behind him.

“Come!” he commanded.

A tall man entered, closed the door behind him and with hat in hand stood looking at Carrington with a half-smile which might have been slightly diffident, or impudent or defiant—it was puzzling.

Carrington had twisted in his chair to get a glimpse of his visitor; he now grunted, resumed his former position and said, gruffly:

"Hello, Danforth!"

Danforth stepped over to the bay, and without invitation drew up a chair and seated himself near Carrington.

Danforth was slender, big-framed, and sinewy. His shoulders were broad and his waist slim. There was a stubborn thrust to his chin; his nose was a trifle too long to perfectly fit his face; his mouth a little too big, and the lips too thin. The nose had a slight droop that made one think of selfishness and greed, and the thin lips, with a downward swerve at the corners, suggested cruelty.

These defects, however, were not prominent, for they were offset by a really distinguished head with a mass of short, curly hair that ruffled attractively under the brim of the felt hat he wore.

The hat was in his right hand, now, but it had left its impress on his hair, and as he sat down he ran his free hand through it. Danforth knew where his attractions were.

He grinned shallowly at Carrington when the latter turned and looked at him.

He cleared his throat. "I suppose you've heard about it?"

"I couldn't help hearing." Carrington scowled at the other. "What in hell was wrong? We send you out here, give you more than a year's time and all the money you want—which has been plenty—and then you lose. What in the devil was the matter?"

"Too much Taylor," smirked the other.

"But what else?"

"Nothing else — just Taylor."

Carrington exclaimed profanely.

"Why, the man didn't even know he was a candidate! He was on the train I came in on!"

"It was Neil Norton's scheme," explained Danforth. "I had *him* beaten to a frazzle. I suppose he knew it. Two days before election he suddenly withdrew his name and substituted Taylor's. You know what happened. He licked me two to one. He was too popular for me — damn him!"

"Norton owns a newspaper here — the only one in the county — the *Eagle*."

"Why didn't you buy him?"

Danforth grinned sarcastically: "I didn't feel that reckless."

"Honest, eh?"

Carrington rested his chin in the palm of his right hand and scowled into the street. He was convinced that Danforth had done everything he could to win the election, and he was bitterly chagrined over the result. But that result was not the dominating thought in his mind. He kept seeing Taylor as the latter had stood on the station platform, stunned with surprise over the knowledge that he had been so signally honored by the people of Dawes.

And Carrington had seen Marion Harlan's glances at the man; he had been aware of the admiring smile she had given Taylor; and bitter passion gripped Carrington at the recollection of the smile.

More—he had seen Taylor's face when the girl had smiled. The smile had thrilled Taylor—it had held promise for him, and Carrington knew it.

Carrington continued to stare out into the street. Danforth watched him furtively, in silence.

At last, not opening his lips, Carrington spoke:

"Tell me about this man, Taylor."

"Taylor owns the Arrow ranch, in the basin south of here. His ranch covers about twenty thousand acres. He has a clear title.

"According to report, he employs about thirty men. They are holy terrors—that is, they are what is called 'hard cases,' though they are not outlaws by any means. Just a devil-may-care bunch that raises hell when it strikes town. They swear by Taylor."

So far as Carrington could see, everybody in Dawes swore by Taylor. Carrington grimaced.

"That isn't what I want to know," he flared. "How long has he been here; what kind of a fellow is he?"

"Taylor owned the Arrow before Dawes was founded. When the railroad came through it brought with it some land-sharks that tried to frame up on the ranch-owners in the vicinity. It was a slick scheme, they tell me. They

had clouded every title, and figured to grab the whole county, it seems.

"Taylor went after them. People I've talked with here say it was a dandy shindy while it lasted. The land-grabbers brought the courts in, and a crooked judge. Taylor fought them, crooked judge and all, to a bite-the-dust finish. Toward the end it was a free-for-all—and the land-grabbers were chased out of the county.

"Naturally, the folks around here think a lot of Taylor for the part he played in the deal. Besides that, he's a man that makes friends quickly—and holds them."

"Has Taylor any interests besides his ranch?"

"A share in the water company, I believe. He owns some land in town; and he is usually on all the public committees here."

"About thirty, isn't he?"

"Twenty-eight."

Carrington looked at the other with a sidelong, sneering grin:

"Have any ladies come into his young life?"

Danforth snickered. "You've got me—I hadn't inquired. He doesn't seem to be much of a ladies' man, though, I take it. Doesn't seem to have time to monkey with them."

"H-m!" Carrington's lips went into a pout as he stared straight ahead of him.

Danforth at last broke a long silence with:

"Well, we got licked, all right. What's going to happen now? Are you going to quit?"

"Quit?" Carrington snapped the word at the other, his eyes flaming with rage. Then he laughed, mirthlessly, resuming: "This defeat was unexpected; I wasn't set for it. But it won't alter things—very much. I'll have to shake a leg, that's all. What time does the next train leave here for the capital?"

"At two o'clock this afternoon." Danforth's eyes widened as he looked at Carrington. The curiosity in his glance caused Carrington to laugh shortly.

"You don't mean that the governor is in this thing?" said Danforth.

"Why not?" demanded Carrington. "Bah! Do you think I came in with my eyes closed!"

There was a new light in Danforth's eyes—the flame of renewed hope.

"Then we've still got a chance," he declared.

Carrington laughed. "A too-popular mayor is not a good thing for a town," he said significantly.

CHAPTER VII

THE SHADOW OF THE PAST

MARION HARLAN and her uncle, Elam Parsons, did not accompany Carrington to the Castle Hotel. By telegraph, through Danforth, Carrington had bought a house near Dawes, and shortly after Quinton Taylor left the station platform accompanied by his friends and admirers, Marion and her uncle were in a buckboard riding toward the place that, henceforth, was to be their home.

For that question had been settled before the party left Westwood. Parsons had declared his future activities were to be centered in Dawes, that he had no further interests to keep him in Westwood, and that he intended to make his home in Dawes.

Certainly Marion had few interests in the town that had been the scene of the domestic tragedy that had left her parentless. She was glad to get away. For though she had not been to blame for what had happened, she was painfully conscious of the stares that followed her everywhere, and aware of the morbid curiosity with which her neighbors regarded her. Also—through the medium of certain of her “friends,” she had become

cognizant of speculative whisperings, such as: "To think of being brought up like that? Do you think she will be like her mother?" Or—"What's bred in the bone, *et cetera*."

Perhaps these good people did not mean to be unkind; certainly the crimson stains that colored the girl's cheeks when she passed them should have won their charity and their silence.

There was nothing in Westwood for her; and so she was glad to get away. And the trip westward toward Dawes opened a new vista of life to her. She was leaving the old and the tragic and adventuring into the new and promising, where she could face life without the onus of a shame that had not been hers.

Before she was half way to Dawes she had forgotten Westwood and its wagging tongues. She alone, of all the passengers in the Pullman, had not been aware of the heat and the discomfort. She had loved every foot of the great prairie land that, green and beautiful, had flashed past the car window; she had gazed with eager, interested eyes into the far reaches of the desert through which she had passed, filling her soul with the mystic beauty of this new world, reveling in its vastness and in the atmosphere of calm that seemed to engulf it.

Dawes had not disappointed her; on the contrary, she loved it at first sight. For though Dawes was new and crude, it looked rugged and honest—and rather too

busy to hesitate for the purpose of indulging in gossip — idle or otherwise. Dawes, she was certain, was occupying itself with progress — a thing that, long since, Westwood had forgotten.

Five minutes after she had entered the buckboard, the spirit of this new world had seized upon the girl and she was athrob and atingle with the joy of it. It filled her veins; it made her cheeks flame and her eyes dance. And the strange aroma — the pungent breath of the sage, borne to her on the slight breeze — she drew into her lungs with great long breaths that seemed to intoxicate her.

“Oh,” she exclaimed delightedly, “isn’t it great! Oh, I love it!”

Elam Parsons grinned at her — the habitual smirk with which he recognized all emotion not his own.

“It *does* look like a good field for business,” he conceded.

The girl looked at him quickly, divined the sordidness of his thoughts, and puckered her brows in a frown. And thereafter she enjoyed the esthetic beauties of her world without seeking confirmation from her uncle.

Her delight grew as the journey to the new home progressed. She saw the fertile farming country stretching far in the big section of country beyond the water-filled basin; her eyes glowed as the irrigation ditches, with their locks and gates, came under her observation; and

she sat silent, awed by the mightiness of it all — the tall, majestic mountains looming somberly many miles distant behind a glowing mist — like a rose veil or a gauze curtain lowered to partly conceal the mystic beauty of them.

Intervening were hills and flats and draws and valleys, and miles and miles of level grass land, green and peaceful in the shimmering sunlight that came from somewhere near the center of the big, pale-blue inverted bowl of sky; she caught the silvery glitter of a river that wound its way through the country like a monstrous serpent; she saw dark blotches, miles long, which she knew were forests, for she could see the spires of trees thrusting upward. But from where she rode the trees seemed to be no larger than bushes.

Looking backward, she could see Dawes. Already the buckboard had traveled two or three miles, but the town seemed near, and she had quite a shock when she looked back at it and saw the buildings, mere huddled shanties, spoiling the beauty of her picture.

A mile or so farther — four miles altogether, Parsons told her — and they came in sight of a house. She had difficulty restraining her delight when they climbed out of the buckboard and Parsons told her the place was to be their permanent home. For it was such a house as she had longed to live in all the days of her life.

The first impression it gave her was that of spacious-

ness. For though only one story in height, the house contained many rooms. Those, however, she saw later.

The exterior was what intrigued her interest at first glance. So far as she knew, it was the only brick building in the country. She had seen none such in Dawes.

There was a big porch across the front; the windows were large; there were vines and plants thriving in the shade from some big cottonwood trees near by—in fact, the house seemed to have been built in a grove of the giant trees; there were several outhouses, one of which had chickens in an enclosure near it; there was a garden, well-kept; and the girl saw that back of the house ran a little stream which flowed sharply downward, later to tumble into the big basin far below the irrigation dam.

While Parsons was superintending the unloading of the buckboard, Marion explored the house. It was completely furnished, and her eyes glowed with pleasure as she inspected it. And when Parsons and the driver were carrying the baggage in she was outside the house, standing at the edge of a butte whose precipitous walls descended sharply to the floor of the irrigation basin, two or three hundred feet below. She could no longer see the cultivated level, with its irrigation ditches, but she could see the big dam, a mile or so up the valley toward Dawes, with the water creeping over it, and the big valley itself, slumbering in the pure, white light of the morning.

She went inside, slightly awed, and Parsons, noting her excitement, smirked at her. She left him and went to her room. Emerging later she discovered that Parsons was not in the house. She saw him, however, at a distance, looking out into the valley.

And then, in the kitchen, Marion came upon the housekeeper, a negro woman of uncertain age. Parsons had not told her there was to be a housekeeper.

The negro woman grinned broadly at her astonishment.

"Lawsey, ma'am; you jes' got to have a housekeeper, I reckon! How you ever git along without a housekeeper? You're too fine an' dainty to keep house you'self!"

The woman's name, the latter told her, was Martha, and there was honest delight—and, it seemed to Marion, downright relief in her eyes when she looked at the new mistress.

"You ain't got no 'past,' that's certain, honey," she declared, with a delighted smile. "The woman that lived here befo' had a past, honey. A man named Huggins lived in this house, an' she said she's his wife. Wife! Lawsey! No man has a wife like that! She had a past, that woman, an' mebbe a present, too—he, he, he!"

"He was the man what put the railroad through here, honey. I done hear the woman say—her name was Blanche, honey—that Huggins was one of them ultra rich. But whatever it was that ailed him, honey, didn't help his looks none. Pig-eye, I used to call him, when

I'se mad at him — which was mostly all the time — he, he, he!”

The girl's face whitened. Was she never to escape the atmosphere she loathed? She shuddered and Martha patted her sympathetically on the shoulder.

“There, there, honey; you ain't 'sponsible for other folks' affairs. Jes' you hold you' head up an' go about you' business. Nobody say anything to you because you' livin' here.”

But Martha's words neither comforted nor consoled the girl. She went again to her room and sat for a long time, looking out of a window. For now all the cheer had gone out of the house; the rooms looked dull and dreary — and empty, as of something gone out of them.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCERNING "SQUINT"

MARION HARLAN had responded eagerly to Carrington's fabrication regarding the rumor of Lawrence Harlan's presence in Dawes. Carrington's reference to her father's sojourn in the town had been vague—he merely told her that a rumor had reached him—a man's word, without details—and she had accepted it at its face value. She was impatient to run the rumor down, to personally satisfy herself, and she believed Carrington.

But she spent a fruitless week interrogating people in Dawes. She had gone to the courthouse, there to pass long hours searching the records—and had found nothing. Then, systematically, she had gone from store to store—making small purchases and quizzing everyone she came in contact with. None had known a man named Harlan; it seemed that not one person in Dawes had ever heard of him.

Parsons had returned to town in the buckboard shortly after noon on the day of their arrival at the new house, and she had not seen him again until the following morning. Then he had told her that Carrington had gone

away—he did not know where. Carrington would not return for a week or two, he inferred.

Parsons had bought some horses. A little bay, short-coupled but wiry, belonged to her, Parsons said—it was a present from Carrington.

She hesitated to accept the horse; but the little animal won her regard by his affectionate mannerisms, and at the end of a day of doubt and indecision she accepted him.

She had ridden horses in Westwood—bareback when no one had been looking, and with a side-saddle at other times—but she discovered no side-saddle in Dawes. However, she did encounter no difficulty in unearthing a riding-habit with a divided skirt, and though she got into that with a pulse of trepidation and embarrassment, she soon discovered it to be most comfortable and convenient.

And Dawes did not stare at her because she rode "straddle." At first she was fearful, and watched Dawes's citizens furtively; but when she saw that she attracted no attention other than would be attracted by any good-looking young woman in more conventional attire, she felt more at ease. But she could not help thinking about the sanctimonious inhabitants of Westwood. Would they not have declared their kindly predictions vindicated had they been permitted to see her? She could almost hear the chorus of "I-told-you-so's"—they rang in her ears over a distance of many hundreds of miles!

But the spirit of the young, unfettered country had got into her soul, and she went her way unmindful of Westwood's opinions.

For three days she continued her search for tidings of her father, eager and hopeful; and then for the remainder of the week she did her searching mechanically, doggedly, with a presentiment of failure to harass her.

And then one morning, when she was standing beside her horse near the stable door, ready to mount and fully determined to pursue the Carrington rumor to the end, the word she sought was brought to her.

She saw a horseman coming toward her from the direction of Dawes. He was not Parsons — for the rider was short and broad; and besides, Parsons was spending most of his time in Dawes.

The girl watched the rider, assured, as he came nearer, that he was a stranger; and when he turned his horse toward her, and she saw he *was* a stranger, she leaned close and whispered to her own animal:

“Oh, Billy; what if it *should* be!”

An instant later she was watching the stranger dismount within a few feet of where she was standing.

He was short and stocky, and undeniably Irish. He was far past middle age, as his gray hair and seamed wrinkles of his face indicated; but there was the light of a youthful spirit and good-nature in his eyes that squinted at the girl with a quizzical interest.

With the bridle-rein in the crook of his elbow and his hat in his hand, he bowed elaborately to the girl.

"Would ye be Miss Harlan, ma'am?" he asked.

"Yes," she breathed, her face alight with eagerness, for now since the man had spoken her name the presentiment of news grew stronger.

The man's face flashed into a wide, delighted grin and he reached out a hand, into which she placed one of hers, hardly knowing that she did it.

"Me name's Ben Mullarky, ma'am. I've got a little shack down on the Rabbit-Ear—which is a crick, for all the name some locoed ignoramus give it. You c'ud see the shack from here, ma'am—if ye'd look sharp."

He pointed out a spot to her—a wooded section far out in the big level country southward, beside the river—and she saw the roof of a building near the edge of the timber.

"That's me shack," offered Mullarky. "Me ol' woman an' meself owns her—an' a quarter-section—all proved. We call it seven miles from the shack to Dawes. That'd make it about three from here."

"Yes, yes," said the girl eagerly.

He grinned at her. "Comin' in to town this mornin' for some knickknacks for me ol' woman, I hear from Coleman—who keeps a store—that there's a fine-lookin' girl named Harlan searchin' the country for news of her father, Larry Harlan. I knowed him, ma'am."

"You did? Oh, how wonderful!" She stood erect, breathing fast, her eyes glowing with mingled joy and impatience. She had not caught the significance of Mullarky's picturesque past tense, "knowed;" but when he repeated it, with just a slight emphasis:

"I *knowed* him, ma'am," she drew a quick, full breath and her face whitened.

"You knew him," she said slowly. "Does that mean——"

Mullarky scratched his head and looked downward, not meeting her eyes.

"Squint Taylor would tell you the story, ma'am," he said. "You see, ma'am, he worked for Squint, an' Squint was with him when it happened."

"He's dead, then?" She stood rigid, tense, searching Mullarky's face with wide, dreading eyes, and when she saw his gaze shift under hers she drew a deep sigh and leaned against Billy, covering her face with her hands.

Mullarky did not attempt to disturb her; he stood, looking glumly at her, reproaching himself for his awkwardness in breaking the news to her.

It was some minutes before she faced him again, and then she was pale and composed, except for the haunting sadness that had come into her eyes.

"Thank you," she said. "Can you tell me where I can find Mr. Taylor—'Squint,' you called him? Is that the Taylor who was elected mayor—last week?"

"The same, ma'am." He turned and pointed southward, into the big, level country that she admired so much.

"Do you see that big timber grove 'way off there—where the crick doubles to the north—with that big green patch beyond?" She nodded. "That's Taylor's ranch—the Arrow. You'll find him there. He's a mighty fine man, ma'am. Larry Harlan would tell you that if he was here. Taylor was the best friend that Larry Harlan ever had—out here." He looked at her pityingly. "I'm sorry, ma'am, to be the bearer of ill news; but when I heard you was in town, lookin' for your father, I couldn't help comin' to see you."

She asked some questions about her father—which Mullarky answered; though he could tell her nothing that would acquaint her with the details of her father's life between the time he had left Westwood and the day of his appearance in this section of the world.

"Mebbe Taylor will know, ma'am," he repeated again and again. And then, when she thanked him once more and mounted her horse, he said:

"You'll be goin' to see Squint right away, ma'am, I suppose. You can ease your horse right down the slope, here, an' strike the level. You'll find a trail right down there. You'll follow it along the crick, an' it'll take you into the Arrow ranchhouse. It'll take you past me own shack, too; an' if you'll stop in an' tell the ol' woman who

you are, she'll be tickled to give you a snack an' a cup of tea. She liked Larry herself."

The girl watched Mullarky ride away. He turned in the saddle, at intervals, to grin at her.

Then, when Mullarky had gone she leaned against Billy and stood for a long time, her shoulders quivering.

At last, though, she mounted the little animal and sent him down the slope.

She found the trail about which Mullarky had spoken, and rode it steadily; though she saw little of the wild, virgin country through which she passed, because her brimming eyes blurred it all.

She came at last to Mullarky's shack, and a stout, motherly woman, with an ample bosom and a kindly face, welcomed her.

"So you're Larry Harlan's daughter," said Mrs. Mullarky, when her insistence had brought the girl inside the cabin; "you poor darlin'. An' Ben told you—the blunderin' idiot. He'll have a piece of my mind when he comes back! An' you're stoppin' at the old Huggins house, eh?" She looked sharply at the girl, and the latter's face reddened. Whereat Mrs. Mullarky patted her shoulder and murmured:

"It ain't your fault that there's indacint women in the world; an' no taint of them will ever reach you. But the fools in this world is always waggin' their tongues, associatin' what's happened with what they think will

happen. An' mebbe they'll wonder about you. It's your uncle that's there with you, you say? Well, then, don't you worry. You run right along to see Squint Taylor, now, an' find out what he knows about your father. Taylor's a mighty fine man, darlin'."

And so Marion went on her way again, grateful for Mrs. Mullarky's kindness, but depressed over the knowledge that the atmosphere of suspicion, which had enveloped her in Westwood, had followed her into this new country which, she had hoped, would have been more friendly.

She came in sight of the Arrow ranchhouse presently, and gazed at it admiringly. It was a big building, of adobe brick, with a wide porch—or gallery—entirely surrounding it. It was in the center of a big space, with timber flanking it on three sides, and at the north was a green stretch of level that reached to the sloping banks of a river.

There were several smaller buildings; a big, fenced enclosure—the corrals, she supposed; a pasture, and a garden. Everything was in perfect order, and had it not been for the aroma of the sage that assailed her nostrils, the awe-inspiring bigness of it all, the sight of thousands of cattle—which she could see through the trees beyond the clearing, she could have likened the place to a big eastern farmhouse of the better class, isolated and prosperous.

She dismounted from her horse at a corner of the house, near a door that opened upon the wide porch, and stood, pale and hesitant, looking at the door, which was closed.

And as she stared at the door, it swung inward and Quinton Taylor appeared in the opening.

CHAPTER IX

A MAN LIES

TAYLOR was arrayed as Marion had mentally pictured him that day when, in the Pullman, she had associated him with ranches and ranges. Evidently he was ready to ride, for leather chaps incased his legs. The chaps were plain, not even adorned with the spangles of the drawings she had seen; and they were well-worn and shiny in spots. A pair of big, Mexican spurs were on the heels of his boots; the inevitable cartridge-belt about his middle, sagging with the heavy pistol; a quirt dangled from his left hand. Assuredly he belonged in this environment—he even seemed to dominate it.

She had wondered how he would greet her; but his greeting was not at all what she had feared it would be. For he did not presume upon their meeting on the train; he gave no sign that he had ever seen her before; there was not even a glint in his eyes to tell her that he remembered the scornful look she had given him when she discovered him listening to the conversation carried on between her uncle and Carrington. His manner indicated that if *she* did not care to mention the matter *he* would

not. His face was grave as he stepped across the porch and stood before her. And he said merely:

"Are you looking for someone, ma'am?"

"I came to see you, Mr. Taylor," she said. (And then he knew that the negro porter on the train had not lied when he said the girl had paid him for certain information.)

But Taylor's face was still grave, for he thought he knew what she had come for. He had overheard a great deal of the conversation between Parsons and Carrington in the dining-car, and he remembered such phrases as: "That fairy tale about her father having been seen in this locality; To get her out here, where there isn't a hell of a lot of law, and a man's will is the only thing that governs him;" and, "Then you lied about Lawrence Harlan having been seen in this country." Also, he remembered distinctly another phrase, uttered by Carrington: "That you framed up on her mother, to get her to leave Larry."

All of that conversation was vivid in Taylor's mind, and mingled with the recollection of it now was a grim pity for the girl, for the hypocritical character of her supposed friends.

To be sure, the girl did not know that Parsons had lied about her father having been seen in the vicinity of Dawes; but that did not alter the fact that Larry Harlan had really been here; and Taylor surmised that she had

made inquiries, thus discovering that there was truth in Carrington's statement.

He got a chair for her and seated himself on the porch railing.

"You came to see me?" he said, encouragingly.

"I am Marion Harlan, the daughter of Lawrence Harlan," began the girl. And then she paused to note the effect of her words on Taylor.

So far as she could see, there was no sign of emotion on Taylor's face. He nodded, looking steadily at her.

"And you are seeking news of your father," he said. "Who told you to come to me?"

"A man named Ben Mullarky. He said my father had worked for you—that you had been his best friend."

She saw his lips come together in straight lines.

"Poor Larry. You knew he died, Miss Harlan?"

"Mullarky told me." The girl's eyes moistened. "And I should like to know something about him—how he lived after—after he left home; whether he was happy—all about him. You see, Mr. Taylor, I loved him!"

"And Larry Harlan loved his daughter," said Taylor softly.

He began to tell her of her father; how several years before Harlan had come to him, seeking employment; how Larry and himself had formed a friendship; how they had gone together in search of the gold that Larry claimed to have discovered in the *Sangre de Christo*

Mountains; of the injury Larry had suffered, and how the man had died while he himself had been taking him toward civilization and assistance.

During the recital, however, one thought dominated him, reddening his face with visible evidence of the sense of guilt that had seized him. He must deliberately lie to the daughter of the man who had been his friend.

In his pocket at this instant was Larry's note to him, in which the man had expressed his fear of fortune-hunters. Taylor remembered the exact words:

Marion will have considerable money and I don't want no sneak to get hold of it — like the sneak that got hold of the money my wife had, that I saved. There's a lot of them around. If Marion is going to fall in with one of that kind, I'd rather she wouldn't get what I leave; the man would get it away from her. Use your own judgment and I'll be satisfied.

And Taylor's judgment was that Carrington and Parsons were fortune-hunters; that if they discovered the girl to be entitled to a share of the money that had been received from the sale of the mine, they would endeavor to convert it to their own use. And Taylor was determined they should not have it.

The conversation he had overheard in the dining-car had convinced him of their utter hypocrisy and selfishness; it had aroused in him a feeling of savage resentment and disgust that would not permit him to transfer

a cent of the money to the girl as long as they held the slightest influence over her.

Again he mentally quoted from Larry's note to him:

The others were too selfish and sneaking. (That meant Parsons — and one other.) Squint, I want you to take care of her. . . . Sell — the mine — take my share and for it give Marion a half-interest in your ranch, the Arrow. If there is any left, put it in land in Dawes — that town is going to boom. Guard it for her, and marry her, Squint; she'll make you a good wife.

Since the first meeting with the girl on the train Taylor had felt an entire sympathy with Larry Harlan in his expressed desire to have Taylor marry the girl; in fact, she was the first girl that Taylor had ever wanted to marry, and the passion in his heart for her had already passed the wistful stage — he was determined to have her. But that passion did not lessen his sense of obligation to Larry Harlan. Nor would it — if he could not have the girl himself — prevent him doing what he could to keep her from forming any sort of an alliance with the sort of man Larry had wished to save her from, as expressed in this passage of the note: "If Marion is going to fall in with one of that kind, I'd rather she wouldn't get what I leave."

Therefore, since Taylor distrusted Carrington and Parsons, he had decided he would not tell the girl of the money her father had left — the share of the proceeds of

the mine. He would hold it for her, as a sacred trust, until the time came — if it ever came — when she would have discovered their faithlessness — or until she needed the money. More, he was determined to expose the men.

He knew, thanks to his eavesdropping on the train, at least something regarding the motives that had brought them to Dawes; Carrington's words, "When we get hold of the reins," had convinced him that they and the interests behind them were to endeavor to rob the people of Dawes. That was indicated by their attempt to have David Danforth elected mayor of the town.

Taylor had already decided that he could not permit Marion to see the note her father had left, for he did not want her to feel that she was under any obligation — parental or otherwise — to marry him. If he won her at all, he wanted to win her on his merits.

As a matter of fact, since he had decided to lie about the money, he was determined to say nothing about the note at all. He would keep silent, making whatever explanations that seemed to be necessary, trusting to time and the logical sequence of events for the desired outcome.

He was forced to begin to lie at once. When he had finished the story of Larry's untimely death, the girl looked straight at him.

"Then you were with him when he died. Did — did he mention anyone — my mother — or me?"

"He said: 'Squint, there is a daughter'" — Taylor

was quoting from the note—"she was fifteen when I saw her last. She looked just like me—thank God for that!" Taylor blushed when he saw the girl's face redden, for he knew what her thoughts were. He should not have quoted that sentence. He resolved to be more careful; and went on: "He told me I was to take care of you, to offer you a home at the Arrow—after I found you. I was to go to Westwood, Illinois, to find you. I suppose he wanted me to bring you here."

The speech was entirely unworthy, and Taylor knew it, and he eased his conscience by adding: "He thought, I suppose, that you would like to be where he had been. I've not touched the room he had. All his effects are there—everything he owned, just as he left them. I had given him a room in the house because I liked him (that was the truth), and I wanted him where I could talk to him."

"I cannot thank you enough for that!" she said earnestly. And then Taylor was forced to lie again, for she immediately asked: "And the mine? It proved to be worthless, I suppose. For," she added, "that would be just father's luck."

"The mine wasn't what we thought it would be," said Taylor. He was looking at his boots when he spoke, and he wondered if his face was as red as it felt.

"I am not surprised." There was no disappointment in her voice, and therefore Taylor knew she was not ava-

ricious — though he knew he had not expected her to be. “Then he left nothing but his personal belongings?” she added.

Taylor nodded.

The girl sat for a long time, looking out over the river into the vast level that stretched away from it.

“He has ridden there, I suppose,” she said wistfully. “He was here for nearly three years, you said. Then he must have been everywhere around here.” And she got up, gazing about her, as though she would firmly fix the locality for future reminiscent dreams. Then suddenly she said:

“I should like to see his room — may I?”

“You sure can!”

She followed him into the house, and he stood in the open doorway, watching her as she went from place to place, looking at Larry’s effects.

Taylor did not remain long at the door; he went out upon the porch again, leaving her in the room, and after a long time she joined him, her eyes moist, but a smile on her lips.

“You’ll leave his things there — a little longer, won’t you? I should like to have them, and I shall come for them, some day.”

“Sure,” he said. “But, look here, Miss Harlan. Why should you take his things? Leave them here — and come yourself. That room is yours, if you say the word.

And a half-interest in the ranch. I was going to offer your father an interest in it—if he had lived——”

He realized his mistake when he saw her eyes widen incredulously. And there was a change in her voice—it was full of doubt, of distrust almost.

“What had father done to deserve an interest in your ranch?” she demanded.

“Why,” he answered hesitatingly, “it’s rather hard to say. But he helped me much; he suggested improvements that made the place more valuable; he was a good man, and he took a great deal of the work off my mind—and I liked him,” he finished lamely.

“And do you think I could do his share of the work?” she interrogated, looking at him with an odd smile, the meaning of which Taylor could not fathom.

“I couldn’t expect that, of course,” he said boldly; “but I owe Harlan something for what he did for me, and I thought——”

“You thought you would be charitable to the daughter,” she finished for him, with a smile in which there was gratitude and understanding.

“I am sure I can’t thank you enough for feeling that way toward my father and myself. But I can’t accept, you know.”

Taylor did know, of course. A desperate desire to make amends for his lying, to force upon her gratuitously what he had illegally robbed her of, had been the motive

underlying his offer. And he would have been disappointed had she accepted, for that would have revealed a lack of spirit which he had hoped she possessed.

And yet Taylor felt decidedly uncomfortable over the refusal. He wanted her to have what belonged to her, for he divined from the note her father had left that she would have need of it.

He discovered by judicious questioning, by inference, and through crafty suggestion, that she was entirely dependent upon her uncle; that her uncle had bought the Huggins house, and that Carrington had made her a present of the horse she rode.

This last bit of information, volunteered by Marion, provoked Taylor to a rage that made him grit his teeth.

A little while longer they talked, and when the girl mounted her horse to ride away, they had entered into an agreement under which on Tuesdays and Fridays—the first Tuesday falling on the following day—Taylor was to be absent from the ranch. And during his absence the girl was to come and stay at the ranchhouse, there to occupy her father's room and, if she desired, to enter the other rooms at will.

As a concession to propriety, she was to bring Martha, the Huggins housekeeper, with her.

But Taylor, after the girl had left, stood for an hour on the porch, watching the dust-cloud that followed the girl's progress through the big basin, his face red, his

soul filled with loathing for the part his judgment was forcing him to play. But arrayed against the loathing was a complacent satisfaction aroused over the thought that Carrington would never get the money that Larry Harlan had left to the girl.

CHAPTER X

THE FRAME-UP

JAMES J. CARRINGTON was unscrupulous, but even his most devout enemy could not have said that he lacked vision and thoroughness. And, while he had been listening to Danforth in his apartment in the Castle Hotel, he had discovered that Neil Norton had made a technical blunder in electing Quinton Taylor mayor of Dawes. Perhaps that was why Carrington had not seemed to be very greatly disturbed over the knowledge that Danforth had been defeated; certainly it was why Carrington had taken the first train to the capital.

Carrington was tingling with elation when he reached the capital; but on making inquiries he found that the governor had left the city the day before, and that he was not expected to return for several days.

Carrington passed the interval renewing some acquaintances, and fuming with impatience in the barroom, the billiard-room, and the lobby of his hotel.

But he was the first visitor admitted to the governor's office when the latter returned.

The governor was a big man, flaccid and portly, and he received Carrington with a big Stetson set rakishly on

the back of his head and an enormous black cigar in his mouth. That he was not a statesman but a professional politician was quite as apparent from his appearance as was his huge, welcoming smile, a certain indication that he was on terms of intimate friendship with Carrington. Formerly an eastern political worker, and a power in the councils of his party, his appointment as governor of the Territory had come, not because of his ability to fill the position, but as a reward for the delivery of certain votes which had helped to make his party successful at the polls. He would be the last carpetbag governor of the Territory, for the Territory had at last been admitted to the Union; the new Legislature was even then in session; charters were already being issued to municipalities that desired self-government—and the governor, soon to quit his position as temporary chief, had no real interest in the new régime, and no desire to aid in eliminating the inevitable confusion.

"Take a seat, Jim," he invited, "and have a cigar. My secretary tells me you've been buzzing around here like a bee lost from the hive, for the past week." He grinned hugely at Carrington, poking the latter playfully in the ribs as Carrington essayed to light the cigar that had been given him.

"Worried about that man Taylor, in Dawes, eh?" he went on, as Carrington smoked. "Well, it *was* too bad that Danforth didn't trim him, wasn't it? But"—and

his eyes narrowed — “I’m still governor, and Taylor isn’t mayor yet — and never will be!”

Carrington smiled. “You saw the mistake, too, eh?”

“Saw it!” boomed the governor. “I’ve been watching that town as a cat watches a mouse. Itching for the clean-up, Jim,” he whispered. “Why, I’ve got the papers all made out — ousting him and appointing Danforth mayor. Right here they are.” He reached into a pigeon-hole and drew out some legal papers. “You can serve them yourself. Just hand them to Judge Littlefield — he’ll do the rest. It’s likely — if Taylor starts a fuss, that you’ll have to help Littlefield handle the case — arranging for deputies, and such. If you need any more help, just wire me. I don’t pack my carpetbag for a year yet, and we can do a lot of work in that time.”

Carrington and the governor talked for an hour or more, and when Carrington left for the office he was grinning with pleasurable anticipation. For a municipality, already sovereign according to the laws of the people, had been delivered into his hands.

Just at dusk on Tuesday evening Carrington alighted from the train at Dawes. He went to his rooms in the Castle, removed the stains of travel, descended the stairs to the dining-room, and ate heartily; then, stopping at the cigar-counter to light a cigar, he inquired of the clerk where he could find Judge Littlefield.

"He's got a house right next to the courthouse — on your left, from here," the clerk told him.

A few minutes later Carrington was seated opposite Judge Littlefield, with a table between them, in the front room of the judge's residence.

"My name is Carrington — James J.," was Carrington's introduction of himself. "I have just left the governor, and he gave me these, to hand over to you." He shoved over the papers the governor had given him, smiling slightly at the other.

The judge answered the smile with a beaming smirk.

"I've heard of you," he said; "the governor has often spoken of you." He glanced hastily over the papers, and his smirk widened. "The good people of Dawes will be rather shocked over this decision, I suppose. But laymen *will* confuse things — won't they? Now, if Norton and his friends had come to *me* before they decided to enter Taylor's name, this thing would not have happened."

"I'm glad it *did* happen," laughed Carrington. "The chances are that even Norton would have beaten Danforth, and then the governor could not have interfered."

Carrington's gaze became grim as he looked at the judge. "You are prepared to go the limit in this case, I suppose?" he interrogated. "There is a chance that Taylor and his friends will attempt to make trouble. But any trouble is to be handled firmly, you understand.

There is to be no monkey business. If they accept the law's mandates, as all law-abiding citizens should accept it, all well and good. And if they don't—and they want trouble, we'll give them that! Understand?"

"Perfectly," smiled the judge. "The law is not to be assailed."

Smilingly he bowed Carrington out.

Carrington took a turn down the street, walking until his cigar burned itself out; then he entered the hotel and sat for a time in the lobby. Then he went to bed, satisfied that he had done a good week's work, and conscious that he had launched a heavy blow at the man for whom he had conceived a great and bitter hatred.

CHAPTER XI

"NO FUN FOOLING HER"

ACCOMPANIED by Martha, who rode one of the horses Parsons had bought, Marion Harlan began her trip to the Arrow shortly after dawn.

The girl had said nothing to Parsons regarding her meeting with Taylor the previous day, nor of her intention to pass the day at the Arrow. For she feared that Parsons might make some objection—and she wanted to go.

That she feared her uncle's deterrent influence argued that she was aware that she was doing wrong in going to the Arrow—even with Martha as chaperon; but that was, perhaps, the very reason the thought of going engaged her interest.

She wondered many times, as she rode, with the negro woman trailing her, if there was not inherent in her some of those undesirable traits concerning which the good people of Westwood had entertained fears.

The thought crimsoned her cheeks and brightened her eyes; but she knew she had no vicious thoughts—that she was going to the Arrow, not because she wanted to see Taylor again, but because she wanted to sit in the

room that had been occupied by her father. She wanted to look again at his belongings, to feel his former presence—as she had felt it while gazing out over the vast level beyond the river, where he had ridden many times.

She looked in on Mrs. Mullarky as they passed the Mullarky cabin, and when the good woman learned of her proposed visit to the Arrow, she gave her entire approval.

“I don’t blame you, darlin’,” declared Mrs. Mullarky. “Let the world jabber—if it wants to. If it was me father that had been over there, I’d stay there, takin’ Squint Taylor at his word—an’ divvle a bit I’d care what the world would say about it!”

So Marion rode on, slightly relieved. But the crimson stain was still on her cheeks when she and Martha dismounted at the porch, and she looked fearfully around, half-expecting that Taylor would appear from somewhere, having tricked her.

But Taylor was nowhere in sight. A fat man appeared from somewhere in the vicinity of the stable, doffed his hat politely, informed her that he was the “stable boss” and would care for the horses; he having been delegated by Taylor to perform whatever service Miss Harlan desired; and ambled off, leading the horses, leaving the girl and Martha standing near the edge of the porch.

Marion entered the house with a strange feeling of

guilt and shame. Standing in the open doorway — where she had seen Taylor standing when she had dismounted the day before — she was afflicted with regret and mortification over her coming. It wasn't right for a girl to do as she was doing; and for an instant she hesitated on the verge of flight.

But Martha's voice directly behind her, reassured her.

"They ain't a soul here, honey — not a soul. You've got the whole house to yo'self. This am a lark — shuah enough. He, he, he!"

It was the voice of the temptress — and Marion heeded it. With a defiant toss of her head she entered the room, took off her hat, laid it on a convenient table, calmly telling Martha to do the same. Then she went boldly from one room to another, finally coming to a halt in the doorway of the room that had been occupied by her father.

For her that room seemed to hallow the place. It was as though her father were here with her; as though there were no need of Martha being here with her. The thought of it removed any stigma that might have been attached to her coming; it made her heedless of the opinion of the world and its gossip-mongers.

She forgot the world in her interest, and for more than an hour, with Martha sitting in a chair sympathetically watching her, she reveled in the visible proofs of her father's occupancy of the room.

Later she and Martha went out on the porch, where, seated in rocking-chairs—that had not been on the porch the day before—she filled her mental vision with pictures of her father's life at the Arrow. Those pictures were imaginary, but they were intensely satisfying to the girl who had loved her father, for she could almost see him moving about her.

"You shuah does look soft an' dreamy, honey," Martha told her once. "You looks jes' like a delicate ghost. A while ago, lookin' at you, I shuah was scared you was goin' to blow away!"

But Marion was not the ethereal wraith that Martha thought her. She proved that a little later, when, with the negro woman abetting her, she went into the house and prepared dinner. For she ate so heartily that Martha was forced to amend her former statement.

"For a ghost you shuah does eat plenty, honey," she said.

Later they were out on the porch again. The big level on the other side of the river was flooded with a slumberous sunshine, with the glowing, rose haze of early afternoon enveloping it, and the girl was enjoying it when there came an interruption.

A cowboy emerged from a building down near the corral—Marion learned later that the building was the bunkhouse, which meant that it was used as sleeping-quarters for the Arrow outfit—and walked, with

the rolling stride so peculiar to his kind, toward the porch.

He was a tall young man, red of face, and just now affected with a mighty embarrassment, which was revealed in the awkward manner in which he removed his hat and shuffled his feet as he came to a halt within a few feet of Marion.

"The boss wants to know how you are gettin' along, ma'am, an' if there's anything you're wantin'?"

"We are enjoying ourselves immensely, thank you; and there is nothing we want — particularly."

The puncher had turned to go before the girl thought of the significance of the "boss."

Her face was a trifle pale as she called to the puncher.

"Who is your boss — if you please?" she asked.

The puncher wheeled, a slow grin on his face.

"Why, Squint Taylor, ma'am."

She sat erect. "Do you mean that Mr. Taylor is here?"

"He's in the bunkhouse, ma'am."

She got up, and, holding her head very erect, began to walk toward the room in which she had left her hat.

But half-way across the porch the puncher's voice halted her:

"Squint was sayin' you didn't expect him to be here, an' that I'd have to do the explainin'. He couldn't come, you see."

"Ashamed, I suppose," she said coldly.

She was facing the puncher now, and she saw him grin.

"Why, no, ma'am; I don't reckon he's a heap ashamed. But it'd be mighty inconvenient for him. You see, ma'am, this mornin', when he was gittin' ready to ride to the south line, his cayuse got an ornery streak an' throwed him, sprainin' Squint's ankle."

The girl's emotions suddenly reacted; the resentment she had yielded to became self-reproach. For she had judged hastily, and she had always felt that one had no right to judge hastily.

And Taylor had been remarkably considerate; for he had not even permitted her to know of the accident until after noon. That indicated that he had no intention of forcing himself on her.

She hesitated, saw Martha grinning into a hand, looked at the puncher's expressionless face, and felt that she had been rather prudish. Her cheeks flushed with color.

Taylor had actually been a martyr on a small scale in confining himself to the bunkhouse, when he could have enjoyed the comforts and spaciousness of the ranchhouse if it had not been for her own presence.

"Is—is his ankle badly sprained?" she hesitatingly asked the now sober-faced puncher.

"Kind of bad, ma'am; he ain't been able to do no walkin' on it. Been hobblin' an' swearin', mostly, ma'am. It's sure a trial to be near him."

"And it is warm here; it must be terribly hot in that little place!"

She was at the edge of the porch now, her face radiating sympathy.

"I am not surprised that he should swear!" she told the puncher, who grinned and muttered:

"He's sure first class at it, ma'am."

"Why," she said, paying no attention to the puncher's compliment of his employer, "he is hurt, and I have been depriving him of his house. You tell him to come right out of that stuffy place! Help him to come here!"

And without waiting to watch the puncher depart, she darted into the house, pulled a big rocker out on the porch, got a pillow and arranged it so that it would form a resting-place for the injured man's head—providing he decided to occupy the chair, which she doubted—and then stood on the edge of the porch, awaiting his appearance.

Inside the bunkhouse the puncher was grinning at Taylor, who, with his right foot swathed in bandages, was sitting on a bench, anxiously awaiting the delivery of the puncher's message.

"Well, talk, you damned grinning inquisitor!" was Taylor's greeting to the puncher. "What did she say?"

"At first she didn't seem to be a heap overjoyed to know that you was in this country," said the other; "but

when she heard you'd been hurt she sort of stampeded, invitin' you to come an' set on the porch with her."

Taylor got up and started for the door, the bandaged foot dragging clumsily.

"Shucks," drawled the puncher; "if you go to *runnin'* to her she'll have suspicions. Accordin' to my notion, she expects you to come a hobblin', same as though your leg was broke. 'Help him to come,' she told me. 'An' you're goin' that way—you hear me! I'll bust your ankle with a club before I'll have her think I'm a liar!'"

"Maybe I *was* a little eager," grinned Taylor.

An instant later he stepped out of the bunkhouse door, leaning heavily on the puncher's shoulder.

The two made slow progress to the porch; and Taylor's ascent to the porch and his final achievement of the rocking-chair were accomplished slowly, with the assistance of Miss Harlan.

Then, with a face almost the color of the scarlet neckerchief he wore, Taylor watched the retreat of the puncher.

His face became redder when Miss Harlan drew another rocker close to his and demanded to be told the story of the accident.

"My own fault," declared Taylor. "I was in a hurry. Accidents always happen that way, don't they? Slipped trying to swing on my horse, with him running. Missed the stirrup. Clumsy, wasn't it?"

Eager to keep his word, of course, Marion reasoned. She had insisted that he be gone when she arrived, and he had injured himself hurrying.

She watched him as he talked of the accident. And now for the first time she understood why he had acquired the nickname Squint.

His eyes were deep-set, though not small. He did not really squint, for there was plenty of room between the eyelids—which, by the way, were fringed with lashes that might have been the envy of any woman; but there were many little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, which spread fanwise toward cheek and brow, and these created the illusion of squinting.

Also, he had a habit of partially closing his eyes when looking directly at one; and at such times they held a twinkling glint that caused one to speculate over their meaning.

Miss Harlan was certain the twinkle meant humor. But other persons had been equally sure the twinkle meant other emotions, or passion. Looking into Taylor's eyes in the dining-car, Carrington had decided they were filled with cold, implacable hostility, with the promise of violence, to himself. And yet the squint had not been absent.

Whatever had been expressed in the eyes had been sufficient to deter Carrington from his announced purpose to "knock hell out of" their owner.

The girl was aware that Taylor was not handsome; that his attractions were not of a surface character. Something about him struck deeper than that. A subtle magnetism gripped her—the magnetism of strength, moral and mental. In his eyes she could see the signs of it; in the lines of his jaw and the set of his lips were suggestions of indomitability and force.

All the visible signs were, however, glossed over with the deep, slow humor that radiated from him, that glowed in his eyes.

It all made her conscious of a great similarity between them; for despite the doubts and suspicions of the people of Westwood, she had been able to survive—and humor had been the grace that had saved her from disappointment and pessimism. Those other traits in Taylor—visible to one who studied him—she knew for her own; and her spirits now responded to his.

Her cheeks were glowing as she looked at him, and her eyes, half veiled by the drooping lashes, were dancing with mischief.

“You were in that hot bunkhouse all morning,” she said. “Why didn’t you send word before?”

“You were careful to tell me that you didn’t want me around when you came.”

There was a gleam of reproach in his eyes.

“But you were injured!”

“Look how things go in the world,” he invited, nar-

rowing his eyes at her. "It's almost enough to make a man let go all holds and just drift along. Maybe a man would be just as well off.

"Early this morning I knew I had to light out for the day, and I didn't want to go any more than a gopher wants to go into a rattlesnake's den. But I had to keep my word. Then Spotted Tail gets notions——"

"Spotted Tail?" she interrupted.

"My horse," he grinned at her. "He gets notions. Maybe he wants to get away as much as I want to stay. Anyhow, he was in a hurry; and things shape up so that I've got to stay.

"And then, when I hang around the bunkhouse all morning, worrying because I'm afraid you'll find out that I didn't keep my word, and that I'm still here, you send word that you'll not object to me coming on the porch with you. I'd call that a misjudgment all around—on my part."

"Yes—it was that," she told him. "You certainly are entitled to the comforts of your own house—especially when you are hurt. But are you sure you *worried* because you were afraid I would discover you were here?"

"I expect you can prove that by looking at me, Miss Harlan—noticing that I've got thin and pale-looking since you saw me last?"

She threw a demure glance at him. "I am afraid you

are in great danger; you do not look nearly as well as when I saw you, the first time, on the train."

He looked gravely at her.

"The porter threw them out of the window," he said. "That is, I gave him orders to."

"What?" she said, perplexed. "I don't understand. What did the porter throw out of the window?"

"My dude clothes," he said.

So he *had* observed the ridicule in her eyes.

She met his gaze, and both laughed.

He had been curious about her all along, and he artfully questioned her about Westwood, gradually drawing from her the rather unexciting details of her life. Yet these details were chiefly volunteered, Taylor noticed, and did not result entirely from his questions.

Carrington's name came into the discussion, also, and Parsons. Taylor discovered that Carrington and Parsons had been partners in many business deals, and that they had come to Dawes because the town offered many possibilities. The girl quoted Carrington's words; Taylor was convinced that she knew nothing of the character of the business the men had come to Dawes to transact.

Their talk strayed to minor subjects and to those of great importance, ranging from a discussion of prairie hens to sage comment upon certain abstruse philosophy. Always, however, the personal note was dominant and the personal interest acute.

That atmosphere—the deep interest of each for the other—made their conversation animated. For half the time the girl paid no attention to Taylor's words. She watched him when he talked, noting the various shades of expression of his eyes, the curve of his lips, wondering at the deep music of his voice. She marveled that at first she had thought him uninteresting and plain.

For she had discovered that he was rather good-looking; that he was endowed with a natural instinct to reach accurate and logical conclusions; that he was quiet-mannered and polite—and a gentleman. Her first impressions of him had not been correct, for during their talk she discovered through casual remarks, that Taylor had been educated with some care, that his ancestors were of that sturdy American stock which had made the settling of the eastern New-World wilderness possible, and that there was in his manner the unmistakable gentleness of good breeding.

However, Taylor's first impressions of the girl had endured without amendations. At a glance he had yielded to the spell of her, and the intimate and informal conversation carried on between them; the flashes of personality he caught merely served to convince him of her desirability.

Twice during their talk Martha cleared her throat significantly and loudly, trying to attract their attention.

The efforts bore no fruit, and Martha might have been

entirely forgotten if she had not finally got to her feet and laid a hand on Marion's shoulder.

"I's gwine to lie down a spell, honey," she said. "You-all don't need no third party to entertain you. An' I's powerful tiahd." And over the girl's shoulder she smiled broadly and sympathetically at Taylor.

The sun was filling the western level with a glowing, golden haze when Miss Harlan got to her feet and announced that she was going home.

"It's the first day I have really enjoyed," she told Taylor as she sat in the saddle, looking at him. He had got up and was standing at the porch edge. "That is, it is the first enjoyable day I have passed since I have been here," she added.

"I wouldn't say that I've been exactly bored myself," he grinned at her. "But I'm not so sure about Friday; for if you come Friday the chances are that my ankle will be well again, and I'll have to make myself scarce. You see, my excuse will be gone."

Martha was sitting on her horse close by, and her eyes were dancing.

"Don' you go an' bust your haid, Mr. Taylor!" she warned. "I knows somebuddy that would be powerful sorry if that would happen to you!"

"Martha!" said Marion severely. But her eyes were eloquent as they met Taylor's twinkling ones; and she saw a deep color come into Taylor's cheeks.

Taylor watched her until she grew dim in the distance; then he turned and faced the tall young puncher, who had stepped upon the porch and had been standing near.

The puncher grinned. "Takin' 'em off now, boss?" he asked.

He pointed to the bandages on Taylor's right foot. In one of the young puncher's hands was Taylor's right boot.

"Yes," returned Taylor.

He sat down in the rocker he had occupied all afternoon, and the young puncher removed the bandages, revealing Taylor's bare foot and ankle, with no bruise or swelling to mar the white skin.

Taylor drew on the sock which the puncher drew from the boot; then he pulled on the boot and stood up.

The puncher was grinning hugely, but no smile was on Taylor's face.

"It worked, boss," said the puncher; "she didn't tumble. I thought I'd laff my head off when I seen her fixin' the pillow for you—an' your foot not hurt more than mine. You ought to be plumb tickled, pullin' off a trick like that!"

"I ain't a heap tickled," declared Taylor glumly. "There's no fun in fooling *her*!"

Which indicated that Taylor's thoughts were now serious.

CHAPTER XII

LIFTING THE MASK

ELAM PARSONS awoke early in the morning following that on which Marion Harlan's visit to the Arrow occurred. He lay for a long time smiling at the ceiling, with a feeling that something pleasurable was in store for him, but not able to determine what that something was.

It was not long, however, before Parsons remembered.

When he had got out of bed the previous morning he had discovered the absence of Marion and Martha. Also, he found that two of the horses were missing — Marion's, and one of the others he had personally bought.

Parsons spent the day in Dawes. Shortly before dusk he got on his horse and rode homeward. Dismounting at the stable, he noted that the two absent horses had not come in. He grinned disagreeably and went into the house. He emerged almost instantly, for Marion and Martha had not returned.

Later he saw them, Marion leading, coming up the slope that led to the level upon which the house stood.

Marion had retired early, and after she had gone to her room Parsons had questioned Martha.

Twice while getting into his clothes this morning Parsons chuckled audibly. There was malicious amusement in the sound.

Once he caught himself saying aloud:

"I knew it would come, sooner or later. And she's picked out the clodhopper! This will tickle Carrington!"

Again he laughed—such a laugh as the good people of Westwood might have used had they known what Parsons knew—that Marion Harlan had visited a stranger at his ranchhouse—a lonely place, far from prying eyes.

Parsons hated the girl as heartily as he had hated her father. He hated her because of her close resemblance to her parent; and he had hated Larry Harlan ever since their first meeting.

Parsons likewise had no affection for Carrington. They had been business associates for many years, and their association had been profitable for both; but there was none of that respect and admiration which marks many partnerships.

On several occasions Carrington had betrayed greediness in the division of the spoils of their ventures. But Carrington was the strong man, ruthless and determined, and Parsons was forced to nurse his resentment in silence. He meant some day, however, to repay Carrington, and he lost no opportunity to harass him.

And yet it had been Parsons who had brought Carrington to Westwood two years before. He knew Carrington; he knew something of the big man's way with women, of his merciless treatment of them. And he had invited Carrington to Westwood, hoping that the big man would add Marion Harlan to his list of victims.

So far, Carrington had made little progress. This fact, contrary to Parsons' principles, had afforded the man secret enjoyment. He liked to see Carrington squirm under disappointment. He anticipated much pleasure in watching Carrington's face when he should tell him where Marion had been the day before.

He breakfasted alone—early—chuckling his joy. And shortly after he left the table he was on a horse, riding toward Dawes.

He reached town about eight and went directly to Carrington's rooms in the Castle.

Carrington had shaved and washed, and was sitting at a front window, coatless, his hair uncombed, when Parsons knocked on the door.

"You're back, eh?" said Parsons as he took a chair near the window. "Danforth was telling me you went to see the governor. Did you fix it?"

Carrington grinned. "Taylor was to take the oath today. He won't take it—at least, not the sort of oath he expected."

"It's lucky you knew the governor."

"H-m." The grim grunt indicated that, governor or no governor, Carrington would not be denied.

Parsons smirked. But Carrington detected an unusual quality in the smirk—something more than satisfaction over the success of the visit to the governor. There was malicious amusement in the smirk, and anticipation. Parsons' expressed satisfaction was not over what *had* happened, but over what was *going* to happen.

Carrington knew Parsons, and therefore Carrington gave no sign of what he had seen in Parsons' face. He talked of Dawes and of their own prospects. But once, when Carrington mentioned Marion Harlan, quite casually, he noted that Parsons' eyes widened.

But Parsons said nothing on the subject which had brought him until he had talked for half an hour. Then, noting that his manner had aroused Carrington's interest, he said softly:

"This man, Taylor, seems destined to get in your way, doesn't he?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Carrington shortly.

"Do you remember telling me—on the train, with this man, Taylor, listening—that your story to Marion, of her father having been seen in this locality, was a fairy tale—without foundation?"

At Carrington's nod Parsons continued:

"Well, it seems it was not a fairy tale, after all. For Larry Harlan was in his section for two or three years!"

"Who told you that?" Carrington slid forward in his chair and was looking hard at Parsons.

Parsons was enjoying the other's astonishment, and Parsons was not to be hurried—he wanted to *taste* the flavor of his news; it was as good to his palate as a choice morsel of food to the palate of a disciple of Epicurus.

"It came in a sort of roundabout way, I understand," said Parsons. "It seems that during your absence Marion made a number of inquiries about her father. Then a man named Ben Mullarky rode over to the house and told her that Larry had been in this country—that he had worked for the Arrow."

"That's Taylor's ranch," said Carrington. A deep scowl furrowed his forehead; his lips extended in a sullen pout.

Parsons was enjoying him. "Taylor again, eh?" he said softly. "First, he appears on the train, where he gets an earful of something we don't want him to hear; then he is elected mayor, which is detrimental to our interests; then we discover that Larry Harlan worked for him. *You'll* be interested to know that Marion went right over to the Arrow—in fact, she spent part of Monday there, and practically *all* of yesterday. More, Taylor has invited her to come whenever she wants to."

"She went alone?" demanded Carrington.

"With Martha, my negro housekeeper. But that—" Parsons made a gesture of derision and went on: "Martha

says Taylor was there with her, and that the two of them—with Martha asleep in the house—spent the entire afternoon on the porch, talking rather intimately.”

To Parsons’ surprise Carrington did not betray the perturbation Parsons expected. The scowl was still frowning his forehead, his lips were still in the sullen pout; but he said nothing, looking steadily at Parsons.

At last his lips moved slightly; Parsons could see the clenched teeth between them.

“Where’s Larry Harlan now?”

Parsons related the story told him by Martha—which had been imparted to the negro woman by Marion in confidence—that Larry Harlan had been accidentally killed, searching for a mine.

When Parsons finished Carrington got up. There was a grin on his face as he stepped to where Parsons sat and placed his two hands heavily on the other’s shoulders.

There was a grin on his face, but his eyes were agleam with a slumbering passion that made Parsons catch his breath with a gasp. And his voice, low, and freighted with menace, caused Parsons to quake with terror.

“Parsons,” he said, “I want you to understand this: I am going to be the law out here. I’ll run things to suit myself. I’ll have no half-hearted loyalty, and I’ll destroy any man who opposes me! Those who are not with me to the last gasp are against me!” He laughed, and Par-

sons felt the man's hot breath on his face — so close was it to his own.

"I was born a thousand years too late, Parsons!" he went on. "I am a robber baron brought down to date — modernized. I believe that in me flows the blood of a pirate, a savage, or an ancient king; I have all the instincts of a tribal chief whose principles are to rule or ruin! I'll have no law out here but my own desires; and hypocrisy — in others — doesn't appeal to me!

"You've told me a tale that interested me, but in the telling of it you made one mistake — you enjoyed the discomfiture you thought it would give me. You tingled with malice. Just to show you that I'll not tolerate disloyalty from you — even in thought — I'm going to punish you."

He dropped his big hands to Parsons' throat, shutting off the incipient scream that issued from between the man's lips. Parsons fought with all his strength to escape the grip of the iron fingers at his throat, twisting and squirming frenziedly in the chair. But the fingers tightened their grip, and when the man's face began to turn blue-black, Carrington released him and looked down at his victim, laughing vibrantly.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SHADOW OF TROUBLE

ELAM recovered slowly, for Carrington had choked him into unconsciousness. Out of the blank, dark coma Parsons came, his brain reeling, his body racked with agonizing pains. His hands went to his throat before he could open his eyes; he pulled at the flesh to ease the constriction that still existed there; he caught his breath in great gasps that shrilled through the room. And when at last he succeeded in getting his breath to come regularly, he opened his eyes and saw Carrington seated in a chair near him, watching him with a cold, speculative smile.

He heard Carrington's voice saying: "Pretty close, wasn't it, Parsons?" But he did not answer; his vocal cords were still partially paralyzed.

He closed his eyes again and stretched out in the chair. Carrington thought he had fainted, but Parsons was merely resting—and thinking.

His thoughts were not pleasant. Many times during the years of their association he had seen the beast in Carrington's eyes, but this was the first time Carrington had even shown it in his presence, naked and ugly. Car-

rington had told him many times that were he not hemmed in with laws and courts he would tramp ruthlessly over every obstacle that got in his way; and Parsons knew now that the man had meant what he said. The beast in him was rampant; his passions were to have free rein; he had thrown off the shackles of civilization and was prepared to do murder to attain his aims.

Parsons realized his own precarious predicament. Carrington controlled every cent Parsons owned—it was in the common pool, which was in Carrington's charge. Parsons might leave Dawes, but his money must stay—Carrington would never give it up. More, Parsons was now afraid to ask for an accounting or a division, for fear Carrington would kill him.

Parsons knew he must stay in Dawes, and that from now on he must play lackey to the master who, at last in an environment that suited him, had so ruthlessly demonstrated his principles.

In a spirit of abject surrender Parsons again opened his eyes and sat up. Carrington rose and again stood over him.

"You understand now, Parsons, I'm running things. You stay in the background. If you interfere with me I'll kill you. I'll kill you if you laugh at me again. Your job out here is to take care of Marion Harlan. You're to keep her here. If she gets away I'll manhandle you! Now get out of here!"

An hour later Parsons was sitting on the front porch of the big house, staring vacantly out into the big level below him, his heart full of hatred and impotent resentment; his brain, formerly full of craft and guile, now temporarily atrophied through its attempts to comprehend the new character of the man who had throttled him.

In Dawes, Carrington was getting into his clothing. He was smiling, his eyes glowing with grim satisfaction. At nine o'clock Carrington descended the stairs, stopped in the hotel lobby to light a cigar; then crossed the street and went into the courthouse, where he was greeted effusively by Judge Littlefield. Quinton Taylor, too, was going to the courthouse.

This morning at ten o'clock, according to information received from Neil Norton — sent to Taylor by messenger the night before — Taylor was to take the oath of office.

Taylor was conscious of the honor bestowed upon him by the people of Dawes, though at first he had demurred, pointing out that he was not actually a resident of the town — the Arrow lying seven miles southward. But this objection had been met and dismissed by his friends, who had insisted that he was a resident of the town by virtue of his large interests there, and from the fact that he occupied an apartment above the Dawes bank, and that he spent more time in it than he spent in the Arrow ranchhouse.

But on the ride to Dawes — on Spotted Tail — (this

morning wonderfully docile despite Tuesday's slander by his master) — Taylor's thoughts dwelt not upon the honor that was to be his, but upon the questionable trick he had played on Marion Harlan, with the able assistance of the tall young puncher, Bud Hemmingway.

He looked down at the foot, now unbandaged, with a frown. The girl's complete and matter-of-fact belief in the story of his injury; her sympathy and deep concern; the self-accusation in her eyes; the instant pardon she had granted him for staying at the ranchhouse when he should not have stayed — all these he arrayed against the bald fact that he had tricked her. And he felt decidedly guilty.

And yet somehow there was some justification for the trick. It was the justification of desire. The things a man wants are not to be denied by the narrow standards of custom. Does a man miss an opportunity to establish acquaintance with a girl he has fallen in love with, merely because custom has decreed that she shall not come unattended — save by a negro woman — to his house?

Taylor made desire his justification, and his sense of guilt was dispelled by half.

Nor was the guilt so poignant that it rested heavily on his conscience since he had done no harm to the girl.

What harm had been done had been done to Taylor himself. He kept seeing Marion as she sat on the porch, and the spell of her had seized him so firmly that last

night, after she had left, the ranchhouse had seemed to be nothing more than four walls out of which all the life had gone. He felt lonesome this morning, and was in the grip of a nameless longing.

All the humor had departed from him. For the first time in all his days a conception of the meaning of life assailed him, revealing to him a glimpse of the difficulties of a man in love. For a man may love a girl: his difficulties begin when the girl seems to become unattainable.

Looming large in Taylor's thoughts this morning was Carrington. Having overheard Carrington talking of her on the train, Taylor thought he knew what Carrington wanted; but he was in doubt regarding the state of the girl's feelings toward the man. Had she yielded to the man's intense personal magnetism?

Carrington was handsome; there was no doubt that almost any girl would be flattered by his attentions. And had Carrington been worthy of Marion, Taylor would have entertained no hope of success—he would not even have thought of it.

But he had overheard Carrington; he knew the man's nature was vile and bestial; and already he hated him with a fervor that made his blood riot when he thought of him.

When he reached Dawes he found himself hoping that Marion would not be in town to see that his ankle was unbandaged. But he might have saved himself that throb

of perturbation, for at that minute Marion was standing in the front room of the big house, looking out of one of the windows at Parsons, wondering what had happened to make him seem so glum and abstracted.

When Taylor dismounted in front of the courthouse there were several men grouped on the sidewalk near the door.

Neil Norton was in the group, and he came forward, smiling.

"We're here to witness the ceremony," he told Taylor.

Taylor's greeting to the other men was not that of the professional politician. He merely grinned at them and returned a short: "Well, let's get it over with," to Norton's remark. Then, followed by his friends, he entered the courthouse.

Taylor knew Judge Littlefield. He had no admiration for the man, and yet his greeting was polite and courteous—it was the greeting of an American citizen to an official.

Taylor's first quick glance about the interior of the courthouse showed him Carrington. The latter was sitting in an armchair near a window toward the rear of the room. He smiled as Taylor's glance swept him, but Taylor might not have seen the smile. For Taylor was deeply interested in other things.

A conception of the serious responsibility that he was to accept assailed him. Until now the thing had been

entirely personal; his thoughts had centered upon the honor that was to be his—his friends had selected him for an important position. And yet Taylor was not vain.

Now, however, ready to accept the oath of office, he realized that he was to become the servant of the municipality; that these friends of his had elected him not merely to honor him but because they trusted him, because they were convinced that he would administer the affairs of the young town capably and in a fair and impartial manner. They depended upon him for justice, advice, and guidance.

All these things, to be sure, Taylor would give them to the best of his ability. They must have known that or they would not have elected him.

These thoughts sobered him as he walked to the little wooden railing in front of the judge's desk; and his face was grave as he looked at the other.

"I am ready to take the oath, Judge Littlefield," he gravely announced.

Glancing sidewise, Taylor saw that a great many men had come into the room. He did not turn to look at them, however, for he saw a gleam in Judge Littlefield's eyes that held his attention.

"That will not be necessary, Mr. Taylor," he heard the judge say. "The governor, through the attorney-general, has ruled you were not legally elected to the office you aspire to. Only last night I was notified of the deci-

sion. It was late, or I should have taken steps to apprise you of the situation."

Taylor straightened. He heard exclamations from many men in the room; he was conscious of a tension that had come into the atmosphere. Some men scuffled their feet; and then there was a deep silence.

Taylor smiled without mirth. His dominant emotion was curiosity.

"Not legally elected?" he said. "Why?"

The judge passed a paper to Taylor; it was one of those that had been delivered to the judge by Carrington.

The judge did not meet Taylor's eyes.

"You'll find a full statement of the case, there," he said. "Briefly, however, the governor finds that your name did not appear on the ballots."

Norton, who had been standing at Taylor's side all along, now shoved his way to the railing and leaned over it, his face white with wrath.

"There's something wrong here, Judge Littlefield!" he charged. "Taylor's name was on every ballot that was counted for him. I personally examined every ballot!"

The judge smiled tolerantly, almost benignantly.

"Of course—to be sure," he said. "Mr. Taylor's name appeared on a good many ballots; his friends *wrote* it, with pencil, and otherwise. But the law expressly states that a candidate's name must be *printed*. Therefore, obeying the letter of the law, the governor has ruled

that Mr. Taylor was not elected." There was malicious satisfaction in Judge Littlefield's eyes as they met Taylor's. Taylor could see that the judge was in entire sympathy with the influences that were opposing him, though the judge tried, with a grave smile, to create an impression of impartiality.

"Under the governor's ruling, therefore," he continued, "and acting under explicit directions from the attorney-general, I am empowered to administer the oath of office to the legally elected candidate, David Danforth. Now, if Mr. Danforth is in the courtroom, and will come forward, we shall conclude."

Mr. Danforth was in the courtroom; he was sitting near Carrington; and he came forward, his face slightly flushed, with the gaze of every person in the room on him.

He smiled apologetically at Taylor as he reached the railing, extending a hand.

"I'm damned sorry, 'Taylor,'" he declared. "This is all a surprise to me. I hadn't any doubt that they would swear you in. No hard feelings?"

Taylor had been conscious of the humiliation of his position. He knew that his friends would expect him to fight. And yet he felt more like gracefully yielding to the forces which had barred him from office upon the basis of so slight a technicality. And despite the knowledge that he had been robbed of the office, he would have

taken Danforth's hand, had he not at that instant chanced to glance at Carrington.

The latter's eyes were aglow with a vindictive triumph; as his gaze met Taylor's, his lips curved with a sneer.

A dark passion seized Taylor—the bitter, savage rage of jealousy. The antagonism he had felt for Carrington that day on the train when he had heard Carrington's voice for the first time was suddenly intensified. It had been growing slowly, provoked by his knowledge of the man's evil designs on Marion Harlan. But now there had come into the first antagonism a gripping lust to injure the other, a determination to balk him, to defeat him, to meet him on his own ground and crush him.

For Carrington's sneer had caused the differences between them to become sharply personal; it would make the fight that was brewing between the two men not a political fight, but a fight of the spirit.

Taylor interpreted the sneer as a challenge, and he accepted it. His eyes gleamed with hatred unmistakable as they held Carrington's; and the grin on his lips was the cold, unhumorous grin of the fighter who is not dismayed by odds. His voice was low and sharp, and it carried to every person in the room:

"We won't shake, Danforth; you are not particular enough about the character of your friends!"

The look was significant, and it compelled the eyes

of all of Taylor's friends, so that Carrington instantly found himself the center of interest.

However, he did not change color; on his face a bland smile testified to his entire indifference to what Taylor or Taylor's friends thought of him.

Taylor grinned mirthlessly at the judge, spoke shortly to Norton, and led the way out through the front door, followed by a number of his friends.

Norton took Taylor into his office, adjoining the courthouse, and threw himself into a chair, grumbling profanely. Outside they could see the crowd filing down the street, voicing its opinion of the startling proceeding.

"An election is an election," they heard one man say — a Taylor sympathizer. "What difference does it make that Taylor's name wasn't *printed*? It's a dawg-gon frame-up, that's what it is!"

But Danforth's adherents were not lacking; and there were arguments in loud, vigorous language among men who passed the door of the *Eagle* office.

"I could have printed the damned ballots, myself — if I had thought it necessary," mourned Norton. "And now we're skinned out of it!"

Norton's disgust was complete and bitter; he had slid down in the chair, his chin on his chest, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his trousers.

Yet his dejection had not infected Taylor; the latter's lips were curved in a faint smile, ironic and saturnine.

It was plain to Norton that whatever humor there was in the situation was making its appeal to Taylor. The thought angered Norton, and he sat up, demanding sharply: "Well, what in hell are you going to do about it?"

Taylor grinned at the other. "Nothing, now," he said. "We might appeal to the courts, but if the law specifies that a candidate's name must be printed, the courts would sustain the governor. It looks to me, Norton, as though Carrington and Danforth have the cards stacked."

Norton groaned and again slid down into his chair. He heard Taylor go out, but he did not change his position. He sat there with his eyes closed, profanely accusing himself, for he alone was to blame for the complete defeat that had descended upon his candidate; and he could not expect Taylor to fight a law which, though unjust and arbitrary, was the only law in the Territory.

Taylor had not gone far. He stepped into the door of the courthouse, to meet Carrington, who was coming out. Danforth and Judge Littlefield were talking animatedly in the rear of the room. They ceased talking when they saw Taylor, and faced toward him, looking at him wonderingly.

Carrington halted just inside the threshold of the doorway, and he, too, watched Taylor curiously, though there was a bland, sneering smile on his face.

Taylor's smile as he looked at the men was still faintly

ironic, and his eyes were agleam with a light that baffled the other men—they could not determine just what emotion they reflected.

And Taylor's manner was as quietly deliberate and nonchalant as though he had merely stepped into the room for a social visit. His gaze swept the three men.

"Framing up—again, eh?" he said, with drawling emphasis. "You sure did a good job for a starter. I just stepped in to say a few words to you—all of you. To you first, Littlefield." And now his eyes held the judge—they seemed to squint genially at the man.

"I happen to know that our big, sleek four-flusher here"—nodding toward Carrington—"came here to loot Dawes. Quite accidentally, I overheard him boasting of his intentions. Danforth was sent here by Carrington more than a year ago to line things up, politically. I don't know how many are in the game—and I don't care. You are in it, Littlefield. I saw that by the delight you took in informing me of the decision of the attorney-general. I just stepped in to tell you that I know what is going on, and to warn you that you can't do it! You had better pull out before you make an ass of yourself, Littlefield!"

The judge's face was crimson. "This is an outrage, Taylor!" he sputtered. "I'll have you jailed for contempt of court!"

"Not you!" gibed Taylor, calmly. "You haven't the

nerve! I'd like nothing better than to have you do it. You're a little fuzzy dog that doesn't crawl out of its kennel until it hears the snap of its master's fingers! That's all for you!"

He grinned at Danforth, felinely, and the man flushed under the odd gleam in the eyes that held his.

"I can classify you with one word, Dave," he declared; "you're a crook! That lets you out; you do what you are told!"

He now ignored the others and faced Carrington.

His grin faded quickly, the lips stiffening. But still there was a hint of cold humor in his manner that created the impression that he was completely in earnest; that he was keenly enjoying himself and that he did not feel at all tragic. And yet, underlying the mask of humor, Carrington saw the passionate hatred Taylor felt for him.

Carrington sneered. He attempted to smile, but the malevolent bitterness of his passions turned the smile into a hideous smirk. He had hated Taylor at first sight; and now, with the jealousy provoked by the knowledge that Taylor had turned his eyes toward Marion Harlan, the hatred had become a lust to destroy the other.

Before Taylor could speak, Carrington stepped toward him, thrusting his face close to Taylor's. The man was in the grip of a mighty rage that bloated his face, that made his breath come in great labored gasps. He had

not meant to so boldly betray his hatred, but the violence of his passions drove him on.

He knew that Taylor was baiting him, mocking him, taunting him; that Taylor's words to the judge and to Danforth had been uttered with the grimly humorous purpose of arousing the men to some unwise and precipitate action; he knew that Taylor was enjoying the confusion he had brought.

But Carrington had lost his self-control.

Without a word, but with a smothered imprecation that issued gutturally from between his clenched teeth, he swung a fist with bitter malignance at Taylor's face.

The blow did not land, for Taylor, self-possessed and alert, had been expecting it. He slipped his head sidewise slightly, evading the fist by a narrow margin, and, tensed, his muscles taut, he drove his own right fist upward, heavily.

Carrington, reeling forward under the impetus of the force he had expended, ran fairly into the fist. It crashed to the point of his jaw and he was unconscious, rigid, and upright on his feet in the instant before he sagged and tumbled headlong out through the open doorway into the street.

With a bound, his face set in a mirthless grin, Taylor was after him, landing beyond him in the windrowed dust at the edge of the sidewalk, ready and willing to administer further punishment.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FACE OF A FIGHTER

SLOUCHING in his chair, in an attitude of complete dejection, Neil Norton was glumly digesting the dregs of defeat.

The *Eagle* office adjoined the courthouse. Both were one-story frame structures, flimsy, with one thin wall between them; and to Norton's ears as he sat with his unpleasant thoughts, came the sound of voices, muffled, but resonant. Someone was speaking with force and insistence. Norton attuned his ears to the voice. It was then he discovered there was only one voice, and that Taylor's.

He sat erect, both hands gripping the arms of his chair. Then he got up, walked to the front door of the *Eagle* office, and looked out. He was just in time to see Carrington tumble out through the door of the courthouse and land heavily on the sidewalk in front of the building. Immediately afterward he saw Taylor follow.

Norton exclaimed his astonishment, and he saw Taylor turn toward him, a broad, mirthless grin on his face.

"Good Heavens!" breathed Norton, "he's started a ruckus!"

Taylor had not moved. He was looking at Norton when a man leaped from the door of the courthouse, straight at him. It was Danforth, his face hideous with rage.

Taylor sensed the movement, wheeled, stumbled, and lost his balance just as Danforth crashed against him. The two men went down in a heap into the deep dust of the street, rolling over and over.

Danforth's impetus had given him the initial advantage, and he was making the most of it. His fists were working into Taylor's face as they rolled in the dust, his arms swinging like flails. Taylor, caught almost unprepared, could not get into a position to defend himself. He shielded his face somewhat by holding his chin close to his chest and hunching his shoulders up; but Danforth landed some blows.

There came an instant, however, when Taylor's surprise over the assault changed to resentment over the punishment he was receiving. He had struck Carrington in self-defense, and he had not expected the attack by Danforth.

Norton, also surprised, saw that his friend was at a disadvantage, and he was running forward to help him when he saw Taylor roll on top of Danforth.

To Norton's astonishment, Taylor did not seem to be in a vicious humor, despite the blows Danforth had landed on him. Taylor came out of the smother with a grin on

his face, wide and exultant, and distinctly visible to Norton in spite of the streaks of dust that covered it. Taylor shook his head, his hair erupting a heavy cloud. Then he got up, permitting Danforth to do likewise.

Regaining his feet, Danforth threw himself headlong toward Taylor, cursing, his face working with malignant rage. When Taylor hit him the dust flew from Danforth's clothes as it rolls from a dirty carpet flayed with a beater. Danforth halted, his knees sagged, his head wobbled. But Taylor gave him a slight respite, and he came on again.

This time Taylor met him with a smother of sharp, deadening uppercuts that threw the man backward, his mouth open, his eyes closed. He fell, sagging backward, his knees unjointed, without a sound.

And now Norton was not the only spectator. Far up the street a man had emerged from a doorway. He saw the erupting volcanoes of dust in the street, and he ran back, shouting, "Fight! Fight!"

Dawes had seen many fights, and had grown accustomed to them. But there is always novelty in another, and long before Danforth had received the blows that had rendered him inactive, nearly all the doors of Dawes's buildings were vomiting men. They came, seemingly, in endless streams, in groups, in twos and singly, eager, excited, all the streams converging at the street in front of the courthouse.

Mindful of the ethics in an affair of this kind, the crowd kept considerably at a distance, permitting the fighting men to continue at their work without interference, with plenty of room for their energetic movements.

Word ran from lip to lip that Taylor, stung by the knowledge that he had been robbed of the office to which he had been elected, had attacked Carrington and Danforth with the grim purpose of punishing them personally for their misdeeds.

Taylor was aware of the gathering crowd. When he had delivered the blows that had finished his political rival, he saw the dense mass of men in the street around him; and he felt that all Dawes had assembled.

There was still no rancor in Taylor's heart; the same savage humor which had driven him into the courthouse to acquaint Carrington and the others with his knowledge of their designs, still gripped him. He had not meant to force a fight, but neither had he any intention of permitting Carrington and Danforth to inflict physical punishment upon him.

But a malicious devil had seized him. He knew that what he had done would be magnified and distorted by Carrington, Danforth, and the judge; that they would charge him with the blame for it; that he faced the probability of a jail sentence for defending himself. And he was determined to complete the work he had started.

Therefore, having disposed of Danforth, he grinned at

the eager, excited faces that hemmed him about, and wheeled toward Carrington.

He was just in time. For Carrington, not badly hurt by Taylor's blow, which had catapulted him out of the door of the courthouse, had been standing back a little, awaiting an opportunity. The swiftness of Taylor's movements had prevented interference by Carrington; but now, with Danforth down, Carrington saw his chance.

Without a word, Carrington lunged forward. They met with a shock that caused the dry dust to splay and spume upward and outward in thin, minute streaks like the leaping, spraying waters of a fountain. They were lost, momentarily, in a haze, as the dust fell and enveloped them.

They emerged from the blot presently, Carrington staggering, his chin on his chest, his eyes glazed—Taylor crowding him closely. For while they had been lost in the smother of dust, Taylor had landed a deadening uppercut on the big man's chin.

The big man's brain was befogged; and yet he still retained presence of mind enough to shield his chin from another of those terrific blows. He had crossed his arms over the lower part of his face, fending off Taylor's fists with his elbows.

A Danforth man in the crowd called on Carrington to "wallop" Taylor, and the big man's answering grin indicated that he was not as badly hurt as he seemed.

Almost instantly he demonstrated that, for when Taylor, still following him, momentarily left an opening, Carrington stepped quickly forward and struck—his big arm flashing out with amazing rapidity.

The heavy fist landed high on Taylor's head above the ear. It was not a blow that would have finished the fight, even had it landed lower, but it served to warn Taylor that his antagonist was still strong, and he went in more warily.

The advantage of the fight was all with Taylor. For Taylor was cool and deliberate, while Carrington, raging over the blows he had received, and in the clutch of a bitter desire to destroy his enemy, wasted much energy in swinging wildly.

The inaccuracy of Carrington's hitting amused Taylor; the men in the crowd about him could see his lips writhing in a vicious smile at Carrington's efforts.

Carrington landed some blows. But he had lived luxuriously during the later years of his life; his muscles had deteriorated, and though he was still strong, his strength was not to be compared with that of the out-of-door man whose clean and simple habits had toughened his muscles until they were equal to any emergency.

And so the battle went slowly but surely against Carrington. Fighting desperately, and showing by the expression of his face that he knew his chances were small,

he tried to work at close quarters. He kept coming in stubbornly, blocking some blows, taking others; and finally he succeeded in getting his arms around Taylor.

The crowd had by this time become intensely partisan. At first it had been silent, but now it became clamorous. There were some Danforth men, and knowing Danforth to be aligned with Carrington—because, it seemed to them, Carrington was taking Danforth's end of the fight—they howled for the big man to "give it to him!" And they grew bitter when they saw that despite Carrington's best efforts, and their own verbal support of him, Carrington was doomed to defeat.

Taylor's admirers vastly outnumbered Carrington's. They did not find it necessary to shout advice to their champion; but they shouted and roared with approval as Taylor, driving forward, the grin still on his face, striking heavily and blocking deftly, kept his enemy retreating before him.

Carrington, locking his arms around Taylor, hugged him desperately for some seconds—until he recovered his breath, and until his head cleared, and he could fix objects firmly in his vision; and then he heaved mightily, swung Taylor from his feet and tried to throw him. Taylor's feet could get no leverage, but his arms were still free, and with both of them he hammered the big man's head until Carrington, in insane rage, threw Taylor from him.

Taylor landed a little off balance, and before he could set himself, Carrington threw himself forward. He swung malignantly, the blow landing glancingly on Taylor's head, staggering him. His feet struck an obstruction and he went to one knee, Carrington striking at him as he tried to rise.

The blow missed, Carrington turning clear around from the force of the blow and tumbling headlong into the dust near Taylor.

They clambered to their feet at the same instant, and in the next they came together with a shock that made them both reel backward. And then, still grinning, Taylor stepped lightly forward. Paying no attention to Carrington's blows, he shot in several short, terrific, deadening uppercuts that landed fairly on the big man's chin, Carrington's hands dropped to his sides, his knees doubled, and he fell limply forward into the dust of the street where he lay, huddled and unconscious, while turmoil raged over him.

For the Danforth men in the crowd had yielded to rage over the defeat of their favorites. They had seen Danforth go down under the terrific punishment meted out to him by Taylor; they had seen Carrington suffer the same fate. Several of them drove forward, muttering profane threats.

Norton, pale and watchful, fearing just such a contingency, shoved forward to the center, shouting:

“Hold on, men! None of that! It’s a fair fight! Keep off, there—do you hear?”

A score of Taylor men surged forward to Norton’s side; the crowd split, forming two sections—one group of men massing near Norton, the other congregating around a tall man who seemed to be the leader of their faction. A number of other men—the cautious and faint-hearted element which had no personal animus to spur it to participation in what seemed to threaten to develop into a riot—retreated a short distance up the street and stood watching, morbidly curious.

But though violence, concerted and deadly, was imminent, it was delayed. For Taylor had not yet finished, and the crowd was curiously following his movements.

Taylor was a picturesquely ludicrous figure. He was covered with dust from head to foot; his face was streaked with it; his hair was full of it; it had been ground into his cheeks, and where blood from a cut on his forehead had trickled to his right temple, the dust was matted until it resembled crimson mud.

And yet the man was still smiling. It was not a smile at which most men care to look when its owner’s attention is definitely centered upon them; it was a smile full of grimly humorous malice and determination; the smile of the fighting man who cares nothing for consequences.

The concerted action which had threatened was, by the tacit consent of the prospective belligerents, postponed

for the instant. The gaze of every partisan—and of all the non-partisans—was directed at Taylor.

He had not yet finished. For an instant he stood looking down at Carrington and Danforth—both now beginning to recover from their chastisement, and sitting up in the dust gazing dizzily about them—then with a chuckle, grim and malicious, Taylor dove toward the door of the courthouse, where Littlefield was standing.

The judge had been stunned by the ferocity of the action he had witnessed. Whatever judicial dignity had been his had been whelmed by the paralyzing fear that had gripped him, and he stood, holding to the door-jambs, nerveless, motionless.

He saw Taylor start toward him; he saw a certain light leaping in the man's eyes, and he cringed and cried out in dread.

But he had not the power to retreat from the menace that was approaching him. He threw out his hands impotently as Taylor reached him, as though to protest physically. But Taylor ignored the movement, reaching upward, a dusty finger and thumb closing on the judge's right ear.

There was a jerk, a shrill cry of pain from the judge, and then he was led into the street, near where Carrington and Danforth had fallen, and twisted ungently around until he faced the crowd.

“Men,” said Taylor, in the silence that greeted him as

he stood erect, his finger and thumb still gripping the judge's ear, "Judge Littlefield is going to say a few words to you. He's going to tell you who started this ruckus — so there won't be any nonsense about actions in contempt of court. Deals like this are pulled off better when the court takes the public into its confidence. Who started this thing, judge? Did I?"

"No-o," was Littlefield's hesitating reply.

"Who did start it?"

"Mr. Carrington."

"You saw him?"

"Yes."

"What did he do?"

"He — er — struck at you."

"And Danforth?"

"He attacked you while you were in the street."

"And I'm not to blame?"

"No."

Taylor grinned and released the judge's ear. "That's all, gentlemen," he said; "court is dismissed!"

The judge said nothing as he walked toward the door of the courthouse. Nor did Carrington and Danforth speak as they followed the judge. Both Carrington and Danforth seemed to have had enough fighting for one day.

The victor looked around at the faces in the crowd that were turned to his, and his grin grew eloquent.

"Looks like we're going to have a mighty peaceable administration, boys!" he said. His grin included Norton, at whom he deliberately winked. Then he turned, mounted his horse—which had stood docilely near by during the excitement, and which whinnied as he approached it—and rode down the street to the Dawes bank, before which he dismounted. Then he went to his rooms on the floor above, washed and changed his clothes, and attended to the bruises on his face. Later, looking out of the window, he saw the crowd slowly dispersing; and still later he opened the door on Neil Norton, who came in, deep concern on his face.

"You've started something, Squint. After you left I went into the *Eagle* office. The partition is thin, and I could hear Carrington raising hell in there. You look out; he'll try to play some dog's trick on you now! There's going to be the devil to pay in this man's town!"

Taylor laughed. "How long does it take for a sprained ankle to mend, Norton?"

Norton looked sharply at Taylor's feet.

"You sprain one of yours?" he asked.

"Lord, no!" denied Taylor. "I was just wondering. How long?" he insisted.

"About two weeks. Say, Squint, your brain wasn't injured in that ruckus, was it?" he asked solicitously.

"It's as good as it ever was."

"I don't believe it!" declared Norton. "Here you've started something serious, and you go to rambling about sprained ankles."

"Norton," said Taylor slowly, "a sprained ankle is a mighty serious thing — when you've forgotten which one it was!"

"What in——"

"And," resumed Taylor, "when you don't know but that she took particular pains to make a mental note of it. If I'd wrap the left one up, now, and she knew it was the right one that had been hurt — or if I'd wrap up the right one, and she knew it was the wrong one, why she'd likely ——"

"*She?*" groaned Norton, looking at his friend with bulging eyes that were haunted by a fear that Taylor's brain *had* cracked under the strain of the excitement he had undergone. He remembered now, that Taylor *had* acted in a peculiar manner during the fight; that he had grinned all through it when he should have been in deadly earnest.

"Plumb loco!" he muttered.

And then he saw Taylor grinning broadly at him; and he was suddenly struck with the conviction that Taylor was not insane; that he was in possession of some secret that he was trying to confide to his friend, and that he had begun obliquely. Norton drew a deep breath of relief.

"Lord!" he sighed, "you sure had me going. And you don't know which ankle you sprained?"

"I've clean forgot. And now she'll find out that I've lied to her."

"*She?*" said Norton significantly.

"Marion Harlan," grinned Taylor.

Norton caught his breath with a gasp. "You mean you've fallen in love with her? And that you've made her — Oh, Lord! What a situation! Don't you know her uncle and Carrington are in cahoots in this deal?"

"It's my recollection that I told you about that the day I got back," Taylor reminded him. And then Taylor told him the story of the bandaged ankle.

When Taylor concluded, Norton lay back in his chair and regarded his friend blankly.

"And you mean to tell me that all the time you were fighting Carrington and Danforth you were thinking about that ankle?"

"Mostly all the time," Taylor admitted.

Norton made a gesture of impotence. "Well," he said, "if a man can keep his mind on a girl while two men are trying to knock hell out of him, he's sure got a bad case. And all I've got to say is that you're going to have a lovely ruckus!"

CHAPTER XV

GLOOM — AND PLANS

ELAM PARSONS sat all day on the wide porch of the big house nursing his resentment. He was hunched up in the chair, his shoulders were slouched forward, his chin resting on the wings of his high, starched collar, his lips in a pout, his eyes sullen and gleaming with malevolence.

Parsons was beginning to recover from his astonishment over the attack Carrington had made on him. He saw now that he should have known Carrington was the kind of man he had shown himself to be; for now that Parsons reflected, he remembered little things that Carrington had done which should have warned him.

Carrington had never been a real friend. Carrington had used him—that was it; Carrington had made him think he was an important member of the partnership, and he had thought so himself. Now he understood Carrington. Carrington was selfish and cruel—more, Carrington was a beast and an ingrate. For it had been Parsons who had made it possible for Carrington to succeed—for he had used Parsons' money all along—having had very little himself.

So Parsons reflected, knowing, however, that he had not the courage to oppose Carrington. He feared Carrington; he had always feared him, but now his fear had become terror—and hate. For Parsons could still feel the man's fingers at his throat; and as he sat there on the porch his own fingers stroked the spot, while in his heart flamed a great yearning for vengeance.

Marion Harlan had got up this morning feeling rather more interested in the big house than she had felt the day before—or upon any day that she had occupied it. She, like Parsons, had awakened with a presentiment of impending pleasure. But, unlike Parsons, she found it impossible to definitely select an outstanding incident or memory upon which to base her expectations.

Her anticipations seemed to be broad and inclusive—like a clear, unobstructed sunset, with an effulgent glow that seemed to embrace the whole world, warming it, bringing a great peace.

For upon this morning, suddenly awakening to the pure, white light that shone into her window, she was conscious of a feeling of satisfaction with life that was strange and foreign—a thing that she had never before experienced. Always there had been a shadow of the past to darken her vision of the future, but this morning that shadow seemed to have vanished.

For a long time she could not understand, and she

snuggled up in bed, her brow thoughtfully furrowed, trying to solve the mystery. It was not until she got up and was looking out of the window at the mighty basin in which—like a dot of brown in a lake of emerald green—clustered the buildings of the Arrow ranch, that knowledge in an overwhelming flood assailed her. Then a crimson flush stained her cheeks, her eyes glowed with happiness, and she clasped her hands and stood rigid for a long time.

She knew now. A name sprang to her lips, and she murmured it aloud, softly: "Quinton Taylor."

Later she appeared to Martha—a vision that made the negro woman gasp with amazement.

"What happen to you, honey? You-all git good news? You look light an' airy—like you's goin' to fly!"

"I've decided to like this place—after all, Martha. I—I thought at first that I wouldn't, but I have changed my mind."

Martha looked sharply at her, a sidelong glance that had quite a little subtle knowledge in it.

"I reckon that 'Squint' Taylor make a good many girls change their mind, honey—he, he, he!"

"Martha!"

"Doan you git 'sturbed, now, honey. Martha shuah knows the signs. I done discover the signs a long while ago—when I fall in love with a worfless nigger in St. Louis. He shuah did captivate me, honey. I done try to

wiggle out of it—but 'tain't no use. Face the fac's, Martha, face the fac's, I tell myself—an' I done it. Ain't no use for to try an' fool the fac's, honey—not one bit of use! The ol' fac' he look at you an' say: 'Doan you try to wiggle 'way from me; I's heah, an' heah I's goin' to stay!' That Squint man ain't no lady-killer, honey, but he's shuah a he-man from the groun' up!"

Marion escaped Martha as quickly as she could; and after breakfast began systematically to rearrange the furniture to suit her artistic ideals.

Martha helped, but not again did Martha refer to Quinton Taylor—something in Marion's manner warned her that she could trespass too far in that direction.

Some time during the morning Marion saw Parsons ride up and dismount at the stable door; and later she heard him cross the porch. She looked out of one of the front windows and saw him huddled in a big rocking-chair, and she wondered at the depression that sat so heavily upon him.

The girl did not pause in her work long enough to partake of the lunch that Martha set for her—so interested was she; and therefore she did not know whether or not Parsons came into the house. But along about four o'clock in the afternoon, wearied of her task, Marion entered the kitchen. From Martha she learned that Parsons had not stirred from the chair on the porch during the entire day.

Concerned, Marion went out to him.

Parsons did not hear her; he was still moodily and resentfully reviewing the incident of the morning.

He started when the girl placed a gentle hand on one of his shoulders, seeming to cringe from her touch; then he looked up at her suddenly.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Don't you feel well, Uncle Elam?" she inquired. Her hand rose from his shoulder to his head, and her fingers ran through his hair with a light, gentle touch that made him shiver with repugnance. There were times when Parsons hated this living image of his brother-in-law with a fervor that seemed to sear his heart. Now, however, pity for himself had rather dulled the edge of his hatred. A calamity had befallen him; he was crushed under it; and the sympathy of one whom he hated was not entirely undesirable.

No sense of guilt assailed the man. He had never betrayed his hate to her, and he would not do so now. That wasn't his way. He had always masked it from her, making her think he felt an affection for her which was rather the equal of that which custom required a man should feel for a niece. Yet he had always hated her.

"I'm not exactly well," he muttered. "It's the damned atmosphere, I suppose."

"Martha tells me that it *does* affect some persons,"

said the girl. "And lack of appetite seems to be one of the first symptoms—in your case. For Martha tells me you have not eaten."

The girl's soft voice irritated Parsons.

"Go away!" he ordered crossly; "I want to think!"

It was not the first time the girl had endured his moods. She smiled tolerantly, and softly withdrew, busying herself inside the house.

Parsons did not eat supper; he slunk off to bed and lay for hours in his room brooding over the thing that had happened to him.

He got up early the next morning, mounted his horse and left the house before Marion could get a glimpse of him. It was still rather early when he reached Dawes. There, in a saloon, he overheard the story of the fight in the street in front of the courthouse, and with tingling eagerness and venomous satisfaction he listened to a man telling another of the terrible punishment inflicted upon Carrington by Quinton Taylor.

Parsons did not go to see Carrington, for he feared a repetition of Carrington's savage rage, should he permit the latter to observe his satisfaction over the incident of yesterday. He knew he could not face Carrington and conceal the gloating triumph that gripped him.

So he returned to the big house. And for the greater part of the day he sat in the rocker on the porch, his soul filled with a vindictive joy.

He ate heartily, too; and his manner indicated that he had quite recovered from the indisposition that had affected him the previous day. He even smiled at Marion when she told him he was "looking better."

But his bitter yearning for vengeance had not been satisfied by the knowledge that Taylor had thrashed Carrington. He knew, now that Carrington had ruthlessly cast him aside, that he was no longer to figure importantly in the scheme to loot the town; he knew that it was Carrington's intention to rob him of every dollar he had entrusted to the man. He knew, too, that Carrington would not hesitate to murder him should he offer the slightest objection, or should he make any visible resistance to Carrington's plans.

But Parsons was determined to be revenged upon Carrington, and he was convinced that he could secure his revenge without boldly announcing his plans.

As for that, he had no plans. But while sitting in the rocker on the porch during the long afternoon, the vindictive light in his eyes suddenly deepened, and he grinned evilly.

That night after supper he exerted himself to be agreeable to Marion. During the interval between sunset and darkness he walked with the girl along the edge of the butte above the big valley which held the irrigation dam. And while standing in a timber grove at the edge of the butte, he questioned her deftly about the news she had

received of her father, and she told him of her visits to the Arrow.

He had watched her narrowly, and he saw the flush that came into her cheeks each time Taylor was mentioned.

"He is a remarkably forceful man," he observed once, when he mentioned Taylor. "And if I am not mistaken, Carrington is going to have his hands full with him."

"What do you mean? Do you mean that Mr. Taylor is not in sympathy with Carrington's plans concerning Dawes?"

"I mean just that. And if you had happened to be in Dawes yesterday you might have witnessed a demonstration of Taylor's lack of sympathy with Carrington's plans. For"—and now Parsons' eyes gleamed maliciously—"after Judge Littlefield, acting under instructions from the governor, had refused to administer the oath of office to Taylor—inducting his rival, Danforth, into the position instead——"

Here the girl interrupted, and Parsons was forced to relate the tale in its entirety.

"Uncle Elam," she said when Parsons paused, "are you certain that Carrington's intentions toward Dawes are honorable?"

Parsons smiled crookedly behind a palm, and then uncertainly at the girl.

"I don't know, Marion. Carrington is a rather hard

man to gauge. He has always been mighty uncommunicative and headstrong. He is getting ruthless and domineering, too. I am rather afraid—that is, my dear, I am beginning to believe we made a mistake in Carrington. He doesn't seem to be the sort of man we thought him to be. If he were like that man Taylor, now——” He paused and glanced covertly at the girl, noting the glow in her eyes.

“Yes,” he resumed, “Taylor *is* a man. My dear,” he added confidentially, “there is going to be trouble in Dawes—I am convinced of that; trouble between Carrington and Taylor. Taylor thrashed Carrington yesterday, but Carrington isn't the kind to give up. I have withdrawn from active participation in the affairs that brought me here. I am not going to take sides. I don't care who wins. That may sound disloyal to you—but look here!” He showed her several black and blue marks on his throat. “Carrington did that—the day before yesterday. Choked me.” His voice quavered with self-pity, whereat the girl caught her breath in quick sympathy and bent to examine the marks. When she stood erect again Parsons saw her eyes flashing with indignation, and he knew that whatever respect the girl had had for Carrington had been forever destroyed.

“Oh!” she said, “why did he choke you?”

“Because I frankly told him I did not approve of his methods,” lied Parsons, smirking virtuously. “He

showed his hand, unmistakably, and his methods mean evil to Dawes."

The girl stiffened. "I shall go directly to Dawes and tell Carrington what I think of him!" she declared.

"No—for God's sake!" protested Parsons. "He would kill me! He would know, instantly, that I had been talking. My life would not be worth a snap of your fingers! Don't let on that I have said *anything* to you! Let him come here, and treat him as you have always treated him. But warn Taylor. Taylor may know something—it is certain he suspects something—but Taylor will not know everything. Make a friend of Taylor, my dear. Go to him—visit his ranch—as much as you like. But if Carrington says anything to you about going there, tell him I opposed it. That will mislead him."

When Parsons and the girl reached the house, Parsons stood near the kitchen door and watched her enter. He did not go in, himself; he walked around to the front and sat on the edge of the porch, grinning maliciously. For he knew something of the tortures of jealousy, and he was convinced that he had added something to the antagonism that already had been the cause of one clash between Carrington and Taylor. And Parsons was convinced that both he and Carrington had made a mistake in planning to loot Dawes; that despite the connivance of the governor and Judge Littlefield, Quinton Taylor would defeat them.

Parsons might lose his money; but the point was that Carrington would also lose. And if Parsons was wise and cautious—and did not antagonize Taylor—there was a chance that he might gain more through his friendship—a professed friendship—for Taylor, than he would have won had he been loyal to Carrington. At the least, he would have the satisfaction of working against Carrington in the dark. And to a man of Parsons' character that was a satisfaction not to be lightly considered.

CHAPTER XVI

A MAN BECOMES A BRUTE

DURING the days that Parsons had passed nursing his resentment, Carrington had been busy. Despite the bruises that marked his face (which, by the way, a clever barber had disguised until they were hardly visible) Carrington appeared in public as though nothing had happened.

The fight at the courthouse had aroused the big man to the point of volcanic action. The lust for power that had seized him; the implacable resolution to rule, to win, to have his own way in all things; his passionate hatred of Taylor; his determination to destroy anyone who got in his path—these were the forces that drove him.

Taylor had brought matters to a sudden and unexpected crisis. Carrington had planned to begin his campaign differently, to insinuate himself into the political life of Dawes; and he had gone to the courthouse intending to keep in the background, but Taylor had forced him into the open.

Therefore, Carrington had no choice, and he instantly accepted Taylor's challenge. After reentering the court-

house, following the departure of Taylor, Carrington had insisted that Judge Littlefield have Taylor taken into custody on a contempt of court charge. Littlefield had flatly refused, and the resulting argument had been what Neil Norton had overheard. But Littlefield had not yielded to Carrington's insistence.

"That would be ridiculous, after what has happened," the judge declared. "The whole country would be laughing at us. More, you can see that public sentiment is with Taylor. And he forced me to publicly admit that you were to blame. I simply won't do it!"

"All right," grinned Carrington, darkly; "I'll find another way to get him!"

And so for the instant Carrington dismissed Taylor from his thoughts, devoting his attention to the task of organizing his forces for the campaign he was to make against the town.

He held many conferences with Danforth and with three of five men who had been elected to the new city council—that political body having also been provided under the new charter. Three of the members—Cartwright, Ellis, and Warden—were Danforth men, cogs of that secret machine which for more than a year Danforth had been perfecting at Carrington's orders.

Some officials were appointed by Mayor Danforth—at Carrington's direction; a chief of police, a municipal judge, a town clerk, a treasurer—and a host of other

office-holders inevitable to a system of government which permits the practice.

Carrington dominated every conference; he made it plain that he was to rule Dawes—that Danforth and all the others were subject to his orders.

Only one day was required to perfect Carrington's organization, and on Thursday evening, with everything running smoothly, Carrington appeared in the palm-decorated foyer of the Castle, a smugly complacent smile on his face. For he had won the first battle in the war he was to wage. To be sure, he had been worsted in a physical encounter with Taylor, as the bruises still on his face indicated, but he intended to repay Taylor for that thrashing—and his lips went into an ugly pout when his thoughts dwelt upon the man.

He had almost forgotten Parsons; he did not think of the other until about eight o'clock in the evening, when, with Danforth in the barroom of the Castle, Danforth mentioned his name. Then Carrington remembered that he had not seen Parsons since he had throttled the man. He ordered another drink, not permitting Danforth to see his eyes, which were glowing with a flame that would have betrayed him.

"This is good-night," he said to Danforth as he raised his glass. "I've got to see Parsons tonight."

Yet it was not Parsons who was uppermost in his mind when he left the Castle, mounted on his horse; the face

of Marion Harlan was in the mental picture he drew as he rode toward the Huggins house, and there ran in his brain a reckless thought — which had been uttered to Parsons at the instant before his fingers had closed around the latter's throat a few days before:

“I was born a thousand years too late, Parsons! I am a robber baron brought down to date—modernized. I believe that in me flows the blood of a pirate, a savage, or an ancient king. I have all the instincts of a tribal chief whose principles are to rule or ruin! I'll have no law out here but my own desires!”

And tonight Carrington's desires were for the girl who had accompanied him to Dawes; the girl who had stirred his passions as no woman had ever stirred them, and who — now that he had seized the town's government — was to be as much his vassal as Parsons, Danforth — or any of them. He grinned as he rode toward the Huggins house — a grin that grew to a laugh as he rode up the drive toward the house; low, vibrant, hideous with its threat of unrestrained passion.

The night had been too beautiful for Marion Harlan to remain indoors, and so, after darkness had swathed the big valley back of the house, she had slipped out, noting that her uncle had gone again to the chair on the front porch. She had walked with Parsons along the butte above the valley, but she wanted to be alone now, to

view the beauties without danger of interruption. Above all, she wanted to think.

For the news that Parsons had communicated to her had affected her strangely; she felt that her uncle's revelations of Carrington's character amounted to a vindication of her own secret opinion of the man.

He had been a volcanic wooer, and she had distrusted him all along. She had never permitted that distrust to appear on the surface, however, out of respect for her uncle—for she had always thought he and Carrington were firm friends. She saw now, though, that she had always suspected Carrington of being just what her uncle's revelation had proved him to be—a ruthless, selfish, domineering brute of a man, who would have no mercy upon any person who got in his way.

Reflecting upon his actions during the days she had known him in Westwood—and upon his glances when sometimes she had caught him looking at her, and at other times when his gaze—bold, and flaming with naked passion—had been fixed upon her, she shuddered, comparing him with Quinton Taylor, quiet, polite, and considerate.

Loyally, she hated Carrington now for the things he had done to Parsons. She mentally vowed that the next time she saw Carrington she would tell him exactly what she thought of him, regardless of the effect her frank opinion might have on her uncle's fortunes.

But still she had not come to the edge of the butte for the purpose of devoting her entire thoughts to Carrington; there was another face that obtruded insistently in the mental pictures she drew—Quinton Taylor's. And she found a grass knoll at the edge of the butte, twisted around so that she could look over the edge of the butte and into the big basin that slumbered somberly in the mysterious darkness, staring intently until she discovered a pin-point of light gleaming out of it. That light, she knew, came from one of the windows of the Arrow ranch-house, and she watched it long, wondering what Taylor would be doing about now.

For she was keeping no secrets from herself tonight. She knew that she liked Taylor better than she had ever liked any man of her acquaintance.

At first she had told herself that her liking for the man had been aroused merely because he had been good to her father. But she knew now that she liked Taylor for himself. There was no mistaking the nameless longing that had taken possession of her; the insistent and yearning desire to be near him; the regret that had affected her when she had left the Arrow at the end of her last visit. Taylor would never know how near she had come to accepting his invitation to share the Arrow with him. Had it not been for propriety—the same propriety which had inseparably linked itself with all her actions—which she must observe punctiliously despite the fact that girls of

her acquaintance had violated it openly without hurt or damage to their reputations; had it not been that she must bend to its mandates, because of the shadow that had always lurked near her, she would have gone to live at the Arrow.

For she knew that she could have stayed at the Arrow without danger. Taylor was a gentleman—she knew—and Taylor would never offend her in the manner the world affected to dread—and suspect. But she could not do the things other girls could do—that was why *she* had refused Taylor's invitation.

She had thought she had conquered her aversion for the big house—the aversion that had been aroused because of the story Martha had told her regarding its former inhabitants, but that aversion recurred to her with disquieting insistence as she sat there on the edge of the butte.

It seemed to her that the serpent of immorality which had dragged its trail across hers so many times was never to leave her, and she found herself wondering about the house and about Carrington and her uncle.

Carrington had bought the horse for her—Billy; and she had accepted it after some consideration. But what if Carrington had bought the house? That would mean—Why, the people of Dawes, if they discovered it—if Carrington had bought it—might place their own interpretation upon the fact that she was living in it.

And the interpretation of the people of Dawes would be no more charitable than that of the people of Westwood! They would think——

She got up quickly, her face pale, and started toward the house, determined to ask her uncle.

Walking swiftly toward the front porch, where she had seen Parsons go, she remembered that Parsons had told her he had arranged for the house, but that might not mean that he had personally bought it.

She meant to find out, and if Carrington owned the house, she would not stay in it another night—not even tonight.

She was walking fast when she reached the edge of the porch—almost running; and when she got to the nearest corner, she saw that the porch was quite vacant; Parsons must have gone in.

She stood for an instant at the porch-edge, a beam of silvery moonlight streaming upon her through a break in the trees overhead, convinced that Parsons had gone to bed; and convinced, likewise, that, were she to disturb him now to ask the question that was in her mind, he would laugh at her.

She decided she would wait until the morning, and she was about to return to the edge of the butte, when she realized that it had grown rather late. She had not noticed how quickly the time had fled.

She turned, intending to enter the house from one of

the rear doors through which she had emerged, when a sound reached her ears—the rapid drumming of a horse's hoofs. She wheeled, facing the direction from which the sound came—and saw Carrington riding toward her, not more than fifty feet distant.

He saw her at the instant her gaze rested on him—an instant before, she surmised, for there was a huge grin on his face as she turned to him.

He was at her side before she could obey a sudden impulse to run—for she did not wish to talk to him tonight—and in another instant he had dismounted and was standing close to her.

“All alone, eh?” he laughed. “And enjoying the moon? Do you know that you made a ravishing picture, standing there with the light shining on you? I saw you as you started to turn, and I shall remember the picture all my life! You are more beautiful than ever, girl!”

Carrington was breathing fast. The girl thought he had been riding hard. But, despite that explanation for the repressed excitement under which he seemed to be laboring, the girl thought she detected the presence of restrained passion in his eyes, and she shrank back a little.

She had often seen passion in his eyes, identical with what glowed in them now, but she had always felt a certain immunity, a masterfulness over him that had permitted her to feel that she could repulse him at will. Now, however, she felt a sudden, cringing dread of him.

The dread, no doubt, was provoked by her uncle's revelation of the man's character; and, for the first time during her acquaintance with Carrington, she felt a fear of him, and became aware of the overpowering force and virility of the man.

Her voice was a little tremulous when she answered: "I was looking for Uncle Elam. He must have gone in."

His face was not very distinct to her, for he was standing in a shadow cast by a near-by tree, and she could not see the bruises that marred the flesh, but it seemed to her that his face had never seemed so repulsive. And the significance of his grin made her gasp.

"That's good. I'm glad he did go in; I did not come to see Parsons."

She had meant to take him to task for what he had done to her uncle, but there was something in his voice that made thoughts of defending Parsons seem futile—a need gone in the necessity to conserve her voice and strength for an imminent crisis.

For Carrington's voice, thick and vibrant, smote her with a presentiment of danger to herself. She looked sharply at him, saw that his face was red and bloated with passion and, taking a backward step, she said shortly:

"I must go in. I—I promised Martha—"

His voice interrupted her; she felt one of his hands on her arm, the fingers gripping it tightly.

"No, you don't," he said, hoarsely; "I came here to have a talk with you, and I mean to have it!"

"What do you mean?" she asked. She was rigid and erect, but she could not keep the quaver out of her voice.

"Playing the innocent, eh?" he mocked, his voice dry and light. "You've played innocent ever since I saw you the first time. It doesn't go anymore. You're going to face the music." He thrust his face close to hers and the expression of his eyes thrilled her with horror.

"What do you suppose I brought you here for?" he demanded. "I'll tell you. I bought the house for you. Parsons knows why—Dawes knows why—everybody knows. You ought to know—you shall know." He laughed, sneeringly. "Westwood could tell you, or the woman who lived in the Huggins house before you came. Martha could tell you—she lived here——"

He heard her draw her breath sharply and he mocked her, gloating:

"Ah, Martha has told you! Well, you've got to face the music, I tell you! I've got things going my way here—the way I've wanted things to go since I've been old enough to realize what life is. I've got the governor, the mayor, the judges—everything—with me, and I'm going to rule. I'm going to rule, my way! If you are sensible, you'll have things pretty easy; but if you're going to try to balk me you're going to pay—plenty!"

She did not answer, standing rigid in his grasp, her

face chalk-white. He did not notice her pallor, nor how she stood, paralyzed with dread; and he thought because of her silence that she was going to passively submit. He thought victory was near, and he was going to be magnanimous in his moment of triumph.

His grip on her arm relaxed and he leaned forward to whisper:

“That’s the girl. No fuss, no heroics. We’ll get along; we’ll ——”

Her right hand struck his face—a full sweep of the arm behind it—burning, stinging, sending him staggering back a little from its very unexpectedness. And before he could make a move to recover his equilibrium she had gone like a flash of light, as elusive as the moonbeam in which she had stood when he had first come upon her.

He cursed gutturally and leaped forward, running with great leaps toward the rear of the house, where he had seen her vanish. He reached the door through which she had gone, finding it closed and locked against him. Stepping back a little, he hurled himself against the door, sending it crashing from its hinges, so that he tumbled headlong into the room and sprawled upon the floor. He was up in an instant, tossing the wreck of the door from him, breathing heavily, cursing frightfully; for he had completely lost his senses and was in the grip of an insane rage over the knowledge that she had tricked him.

Parsons heard the crash as the door went from its hinges. He got out of bed in a tremor of fear and opened the door of his room, peering into the big room that adjoined the dining-room. From the direction of the kitchen he caught a thin shaft of light—from the kerosene-lamp that Martha had placed on a table for Marion's convenience. A big form blotted out the light, casting a huge, gigantic shadow; and Parsons saw the shadow on the ceiling of the room into which he looked.

Huge as the shadow was, Parsons had no difficulty in recognizing it as belonging to Carrington; and with chattering teeth Parsons quickly closed his door, locked it, and stood against it, his knees knocking together.

Martha, too, had heard the crash. She bounded out of bed and ran to the door of her room, swinging it wide, for instinct told her something had happened to Marion. Her room was closer to the kitchen, and she saw Carrington plainly, as he was rising from the débris. And she was just in time to see Marion slipping through the doorway of her own room. And by the time Carrington got to his feet, Martha had heard Marion's door click shut, heard the lock snap home.

Martha instantly closed the door of her own room, fastened it and ran to another door that connected her room with Marion's. She swung that door open and looked into the girl's room; heard the girl stifle a shriek—for the girl thought Carrington was coming upon her

from that direction — and then Martha was at the girl's side, whispering to her — excitedly comforting her.

"The damn trash — houndin' you this way! He ain' goin' to hurt you, honey — not one bit!"

Outside the door they could hear Carrington walking about in the room. There came to the ears of the two women the scratch of a match, and then a steady glimmer of light streaked into the room from the bottom of the door, and they knew Carrington had lighted a lamp. A little later, while Martha stood, her arms around the girl, who leaned against the negro woman, very white and still, they heard Carrington talking with Parsons. They heard Parsons protesting, Carrington cursing him.

"He ain' goin' to git you, honey," whispered Martha. "That man come heah the firs' day, an' I knowed he's a rapsallion." She pointed upward, to where a trap-door, partly open, appeared in the ceiling of the room.

"There's the attic, honey. I'll boost you, an' you go up there an' hide from that wild man. You got to, for that worfless Parsons am tellin' him which room you's in. You hurry — you heah me!"

She helped the girl upward, and stood listening until the trap-door grated shut. Then she turned and grinned at the door that led into the big room adjoining the kitchen. Carrington was at it, his shoulder against it; Martha could hear him cursing.

"Open up, here!" came Carrington's voice through

the door, muffled, but resonant. "Open the door, damn you, or I'll tear it down!"

"Tear away, white man!" giggled Martha softly. "They's a big 'sprise waitin' you when you git in heah!"

For an instant following Carrington's curses and demands there was a silence. It was broken by a splintering crash, and the negro woman saw the door split so that the light from the other room streaked through it. But the door held, momentarily. Then Carrington again lunged against it and it burst open, pieces of the lock flying across the room.

This time Carrington did not fall with the door, but reeled through the opening, erect, big, a vibrant, mirthless laugh on his lips.

The light from the other room streamed in past him, shining full upon Martha, who stood, her hands on her hips, looking at the man.

Carrington was disconcerted by the presence of Martha when he had expected to see Marion. He stepped back, cursing.

Martha giggled softly.

"What you doin' in my room, man; just when I'se goin' to retiah? You git out o' heah—quick! Yo' heah me? Yo' ain't got no business bustin' my door down!"

"Bah!" Carrington's voice was malignant with baffled rage. With one step he was at Martha's side, his hands on her throat, his muscles rigid and straining.

"Where's Marion Harlan?" he demanded. "Tell me, you black devil, or I'll choke hell out of you!"

Martha was not frightened; she giggled mockingly.

"That girl bust in heah a minute ago; then she bust out ag'in, runnin' fit to kill herself. I reckon by this time she's done throw herself off the butte—rather than have you git her!"

Carrington shoved Martha from him, so that she staggered and fell; and with a bound he was through the door that led into Martha's room.

The negro woman did not move. She sat on the floor, a malicious grin on her face, listening to Carrington as he raged through the house.

Once, about five minutes after he left, Carrington returned and stuck his head into the room. Martha still sat where Carrington had thrown her. She did not care what Carrington did to the house, so long as he was ignorant of the existence of the trap-door.

And Carrington did not notice the door. For an hour Martha heard him raging around the house, opening and slamming doors and overturning furniture. Once when she did not hear him for several minutes, she got up and went to one of the windows. She saw him, out at the stable, looking in at the horses.

Then he returned to the house, and Martha resumed her place on the floor. Later, she heard Carrington enter the house again, and after that she heard Parsons' voice,

raised in high-terrered protest. Then there was another silence. Again Martha looked out of a window. This time she saw Carrington on his horse, riding away.

But for half an hour Martha remained at the window. She feared Carrington's departure was a subterfuge, and she was not mistaken. For a little later Carrington returned, riding swiftly. He slid from his horse at a little distance from the house and ran toward it. Martha was in the kitchen when he came in. He did not speak to her as he came into the room, but passed her and again made a search of the house. Passing Martha again he gave her a malevolent look, then halted at the outside door.

The man's wild rage seemed to have left him; he was calm — polite, even.

"Tell your mistress I am sorry for what has occurred. I am afraid I was a bit excited. I shall not harm her; I won't bother her again."

He stepped through the doorway and, going again to a window and drawing back the curtain slightly, Martha watched him.

Carrington went to the stable, entered, and emerged again presently, leading two horses — Parsons' horse and Billy. He led the animals to where his own horse stood, climbed into the saddle and rode away, the two horses following. At the edge of the wood he turned and looked back. Then the darkness swallowed him.

For another half-hour Martha watched the Dawes trail

from a window. Then she drew a deep breath and went into Marion's room, standing under the trap-door.

"I reckon you kin come down now, honey—he's gone."

A little later, with Marion standing near her in the room, the light from the kerosene-lamp streaming upon them through the shattered door, Martha was speaking rapidly:

"He acted mighty suspicious, honey; an' he's up to some dog's trick, shuah as you'm alive. You got to git out of heah, honey—mighty quick! 'Pears he thinks you is hid somewhares around heah, an' he's figgerin' on makin' you stay heah. An' if you wants to git away, you's got to walk, for he's took the hosses!" She shook her head, her eyes wide with a reflection of the complete stupefaction that had descended upon her. "Laws A'mighty, what a ragin' devil that man is, honey! I'se seen men *an'* men—an' I knowed a nigger once that was——"

But Martha paused, for Marion was paying no attention to her. The girl was pulling some articles of wearing apparel from some drawers, packing them hurriedly into a small handbag, and Martha sprang quickly to help her, divining what the girl intended to do.

"That's right, honey; doan you stay heah in this house another minit! You git out as quick as you kin. You go right over to that Squint man's house an' tell him to

protect you. 'Cause you's goin' to need protection, honey — an' don't you forgit it!"

The girl's white face was an eloquent sign of her conception of the danger that confronted her. But she spoke no word while packing her handbag. When she was ready she turned to the door, to confront Martha, who also carried a satchel. Together the two went out of the house, crossed the level surrounding it, and began to descend the long slope that led down into the mighty basin in which, some hours before, the girl had seen the pin-point of light glimmering across the sea of darkness toward her. And toward that light, as toward a beacon that promised a haven from a storm, she went, Martha following.

From a window of the house a man watched them — Parsons — in the grip of a paralyzing terror, his pallid face pressed tightly against the glass of the window as he watched until he could see them no longer.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WRONG ANKLE

BUD HEMMINGWAY, the tall, red-faced young puncher who had assisted Quinton Taylor in the sprained-ankle deception, saw the dawn breaking through one of the windows of the bunkhouse when he suddenly opened his eyes after dreaming of steaming flapjacks soaked in the sirup he liked best. He stretched out on his back in the wall-bunk and licked his lips.

“Lordy, I’m hungry!”

But he decided to rest for a few minutes while he considered the cook — away with the outfit to a distant corner of the range.

He reflected bitterly that the cook was away most of the time, and that a man fared considerably better with the outfit than he did by staying at the home ranch. For one thing, when a man was with the outfit he got “grub,” without having to rustle it himself — that was why it was better to be with the outfit.

“A man don’t git nothin’ to eat at all, scarcely — when he’s got to rustle his own grub,” mourned Bud. “He’s got the appetite, all right, but he don’t know how to rassle the ingredients which goes into good grub. Take them

flapjacks, now." (He licked his lips again.) "They're scrumptuous. But that damned hyena which slings grub for the outfit won't tell a man how he makes 'em, which greediness is goin' to git him into a heap of trouble some day — when I git so hungry that I feel a heap reckless!"

Bud watched the dawn broaden. He knew he ought to get up, for this was the day on which Marion Harlan was to visit the Arrow — and Taylor had warned him to be on hand early to bandage the ankle again — Taylor having decided that not enough time had elapsed to effect a cure.

But Bud did not get up until a glowing shaft entering the window warned him that the sun was soon to appear above the horizon. Then he bounded out of the bunk and lurched heavily to an east window.

What he saw when he looked out made him gasp for breath and hang hard to the window-sill, while his eyes bulged and widened with astonishment. For upon the porch of the ranchhouse — seated in the identical chairs in which they had sat during their previous visit, were Marion Harlan and the negro woman!

Bud stepped back from the window and rubbed his eyes. Then he went to the window again and looked with all his vision. And then a grin covered his face.

For the two women seemed to be asleep. Bud would have sworn they were asleep! For the negress was hunched up in her chair — a big, almost shapeless black mass — with her chin hidden in the swell of her ample

bosom; while the girl was leaning back, her figure slack with the utter relaxation that accompanies deep sleep, her eyes closed and her hat a little awry. Bud was certain *she* was asleep, for no girl in her waking moments would permit her hat to rest upon her head in that negligent manner.

Bud scratched his head many times while hurriedly getting into his clothing.

"I'm bettin' *they* didn't wait for flapjacks *this* mornin'!" he confided to himself, mentally. "Must like it here a heap," he reflected. "Well, there's nothin' like gittin' an early start when you're goin' anywhere!" he grinned.

Stealthily he opened the door of the bunkhouse, watching furtively as he stepped out, lest he be seen; and then when he noted that the ~~women~~ men did not move, he darted across the yard, vaulted the corral fence, ran around the corner of the ranchhouse, carefully opened a rear door, and presently stood beside a bed gently shaking its tousled-haired occupant.

"Git up, you sufferin' fool!" he whispered hoarsely; "they're here!"

Taylor's eyes snapped open and were fixed on Bud with a resentful glare, which instantly changed to reserved amusement when he saw Bud's bulging eyes and general evidence of suppressed excitement.

He yawned sleepily, stretching his arms wide.

"The outfit, eh? Well, tell Bothwell I'll see him ——"

"Bothwell, hell!" sneered Bud. "It ain't the outfit! It ain't no damned range boss! It's *her*, I tell you! An' if you're figgerin' on gittin' that ankle bandaged before—— That starts you to runnin', eh?" he jeered.

For Taylor was out of bed with one leap. In another he had Bud by the shoulders and had crowded him back against the wall.

"Bud," he said, "I've a notion to manhandle you! Didn't I tell you to have me up early?"

"Git your fingers out of my windpipe," objected Bud. "Early! Sufferin' shorthorns! Did you want me to git you up last night? It's only four, now — an' they've been here for hours, I reckon — mebbe all night. How's a man to know anything about a woman?"

Taylor was getting into his clothes. Bud watched him, marveling at his deft movements. "You're sure a wolf at hustlin' when *she's* around!" he offered.

But he got no reply. Taylor was dressed in a miraculously short time, and then he sat down on the edge of the bed and stuck a foot out toward Bud.

"Shut up, and get the bandage on!" he directed.

Bud dove for a dresser and pulled out a drawer, returning instantly with a roll of white cloth, which he unfolded as he knelt beside the bed. For an instant after kneeling he scratched his head, looking at Taylor's feet in perplexity, and then he looked up at Taylor, his face thoughtfully furrowed.

"Which ankle was it I bandaged before?" he demanded; "I've forgot!"

Taylor groaned. He, too, had forgotten. Since he had talked with Neil Norton about the ankle directly after the fight with Carrington in front of the courthouse he had tried in vain to remember which ankle he had bandaged for Miss Harlan's benefit. Driven to the necessity of making a quick decision, his brain became a mere muddle of desperate conjecture. Out of the muddle sprang a disgust for Bud for *his* poor memory.

"You've forgot!" he blurted at Bud. "Why, damn it, you ought to know which one it was — you bandaged it!"

"Well," grinned Bud gleefully, "it was *your* ankle, wasn't it? Strikes me that if I busted one of *my* ankles I wouldn't forget which one it was! Leastways, if I'd busted it just to hang around a girl!"

Taylor sneered scornfully. "You wouldn't bust an ankle for a girl — you ain't got backbone enough. Hell!" he exploded; "do something! Take a chance and bandage one of them — I don't care a damn which one! If she noticed the other time, I'll tell her that one was cured and I busted the other one!"

"She'd know you was lyin'," grinned Bud. He stood erect, his eyes alight with an inspiration. "Wrap up both of 'em!" he suggested. "If she goes to gittin' curious — which she will, bein' a woman — tell her you busted both of 'em!"

"It won't do," objected Taylor; "I couldn't lie that heavy an' keep a straight face."

Bud began to wrap the left ankle. As he worked, the doubt in his eyes began to fade and was succeeded by conviction. When he finished, he stood up and grinned at Taylor.

"That's the one," he said; "the left. I mind, now, that we talked about it. You go right out to her, limpin', the same as you done before, an' she'll not say a word about it. You'll see."

Taylor grunted disbelievingly, and hobbled to the front door. He looked back at Bud, who was snickering, made a malicious grimace at him, and softly opened the door.

Miss Harlan had been asleep, but she was not asleep when Taylor opened the door. Indeed, she was never more wide awake in her life. At the sound of the door opening she turned her head and sat stiffly erect, to face Taylor.

Taylor looked apologetically at his ankle, his cheeks tinged with a flush of embarrassment.

"This ankle, ma'am—it ain't quite well yet. You'll excuse me not being gone. But Bud—that's my friend—says it won't be quite right for a few days yet. But I won't be in your way—and I hope you enjoy yourself."

Miss Harlan was enjoying herself. She was enjoying herself despite the shadow of the tragedy that had almost descended upon her. And mirth, routing the bitter, re-

sentful emotions that had dwelt in her heart during the night, twitched mightily at her lips and threatened to curve them into a smile.

For during her last visit to the Arrow she had noted particularly that it had been Taylor's *right* ankle which had been bandaged, and now he appeared before her with the *left* swathed in white cloth!

But even had she not known, Taylor's face must have told her of the deception. For there was guilt in his eyes, and doubt, and a sort of breathless speculation, and — she was certain — an intense curiosity to discover whether or not she was aware of the trick.

But she looked straight at him, betraying nothing of the emotions that had seized her.

“Does it pain you *very* much?” she inquired.

Had not Taylor been so eager to make his case strong, he might have noted the exceedingly light sarcasm of her voice.

“It hurts a heap, ma'am,” he declared. “Why, last night——”

“I shouldn't think it would be necessary to lie about an ankle,” she said, coldly.

Taylor's face went crimson, and in his astonishment he stepped heavily upon the traitor foot and stood, convicted, before her, looking very much like a reproved schoolboy.

She rose from her chair, and now she turned from Taylor and stood looking out over the big level, while behind

her Taylor shifted his feet, scowled and felt decidedly uncomfortable.

From where Taylor watched her she looked very rigid and indignant—with her head proudly erect and her shoulders squared; and he could almost *feel* that her eyes were flashing with resentment.

Yet had he been able to see her face, he would have seen her lips twitching and her eyes dancing with a light that might have puzzled him. For she had already forgiven him.

“There’s lies — *and* lies,” he offered palliatively, breaking a painful silence.

There was no answer, and Taylor, desperately in earnest in his desire for forgiveness, and looking decidedly funny to Bud Hemmingway, who was watching from the interior of the room beyond the open door, walked across the porch with no suspicion of a limp, and halted near the girl.

“Shucks, Miss Harlan,” he said. “I’m sure caught; and I’m admitting it was a sort of mean trick to pull off on you. But if you wanted to be near a girl you’d taken a shine to—that you liked a whole lot, I mean, Miss Harlan—and you couldn’t think of any *good* excuse to be around her? You couldn’t blame a man for that—could you? Besides,” he added, when peering at the side of her face, he saw the twitching lips, ready to break into a smile, “I’ll make it up to you!”

"How?" It was a strained voice that answered him.

"By manhandling Bud Hemmingway for wrapping up the wrong ankle, ma'am!" he declared.

Both heard a cackle of mirth from the room behind them. And both turned, to see Bud Hemmingway retreating through a door into the kitchen.

It might have been Bud's action that brought the smile to Miss Harlan's face, or it might have been that she had forgiven Taylor. But at any rate Taylor read the smile correctly, and he succeeded in looking properly repentant when he felt Miss Harlan's gaze upon him.

"I won't play any more tricks — on you," he declared. "You ain't holding it against me?"

"If you will promise not to harm Bud," she said.

"That goes," he agreed, and went into the house to get his discarded boot.

When he reappeared, Miss Harlan was again seated in the chair. Swiftly her thoughts had reverted to the incident of the night before, and her face was wan and pale, and her lips pressed tightly together in a brave effort to repress the emotions that rioted within her. In spite of her courage, and of her determination not to let Taylor know of what had happened to her, her eyes were moist and her lips quivering.

He stepped close to her and peered sharply at her, standing erect instantly, his face grave.

"Shucks!" he said, accusingly; "I wouldn't be called

hospitable — now, would I? Standing here, talking a lot of nonsense, and you — you must have started *early* to get here by this time!” Again he flashed a keen glance at her, and his voice leaped.

“Something has happened, Miss Harlan! What is it?”

She got up again and faced him, smiling, her eyes shining mistily through the moisture in them. She was almost on the verge of tears, and her voice was tremulous when she answered:

“Mr. Taylor, I — I have come to ask if you — still — if your offer about the Arrow is still open — if — I could stay here — myself and Martha; if I could accept the offer you made about giving me father’s share of the Arrow. For — for — I can’t go back East — to Westwood, and I won’t stay in the Huggins house a minute longer!”

“Sure!” he said, with a grim smile, aware of her profound emotion; aware, too, that something had gone terribly wrong with her — to make her accept what she had once considered charity — an offer made out of his regard for her father.

“But, look here,” he added. “What’s wrong? There’s something ——”

“Plenty, Mr. Squint.”

This was Martha. She had been awake for some little time, sitting back with her eyes closed, listening. She was now sitting erect, her eyes shining with eagerness to tell all she knew of the night’s happenings.

"Plenty, Mr. Squint," she repeated, paying no attention to Miss Harlan's sharp, "Martha!" "That big rapsallion, Carrington, has been makin' things mighty mis'able for Missy Harlan. He come to the house las' night an' bust the door down, tryin' to git at missy, an' she's run away from him like a whitehead. Then, when he finds he can't diskiver where I hide missy he run the hosses off an' we have to walk heah. That's all, Mr. Squint, 'ceptin' that me an' missy doan stay in that house no more—if we have to walk East—all the way!"

Miss Harlan saw a flash light Taylor's eyes; saw the flash recede, to be replaced by a chilling glow. And his lips grew straight and stiff—two hard lines pressed firmly together. She saw his chest swell and noted the tenseness of his muscles as he stepped closer to her.

"Was your uncle there with you, Miss Harlan?"

She nodded, and saw his lips curve with a mirthless smile.

"What did Carrington do?" The passion in his voice made an icy shiver run over her—she felt the terrible earnestness that had come over him, and a pulse of fear gripped her.

She had never felt more like crying than at this instant, and until this minute she had not known how deeply she had been affected by Carrington's conduct, nor how tired she was, nor how she had yearned for the sympathy Taylor was giving her. But she felt that something in

Taylor's manner portended violence, and she did not want him to risk his life fighting Carrington — for her.

"You see," she explained, "Mr. Carrington did not really *do* anything. He just came there, and was impertinent, and impudent, and insulting. And he told me that he had bought the house; that it didn't belong to uncle — though I thought it did; and that the people of Dawes — and everywhere — would think — things — about me — as the people of Westwood had — thought. And I — I — why, I just couldn't stay —"

"That's enough, Miss Harlan. So Carrington didn't do anything." His voice was vibrant with some sternly repressed passion.

"So you walked all the way here, and you have had no breakfast," he said, shortly. He turned toward the front door, his voice snapping like the report of a rifle:

"Bud!"

And, looking through the doorway, Miss Harlan saw Bud jump as though he had been shot. He appeared in the doorway, serious-faced and alert.

"Rustle some breakfast — quick! And hoe out that spare bedroom. Jump!"

Taylor understood perfectly what had happened, for he remembered what he had overheard between Carrington and Parsons on the train. To be sure, Miss Harlan knew nothing about the conversation, and so she mentally commended Taylor's quickness of perception, and felt grate-

ful to him because he had spared her the horror of explaining further.

She sat down again, aware of the startling unconventionality of this visit and of the conversation that had resulted from it, but oppressed with no sense of shame. For it seemed entirely natural that she should have come to Taylor, though she supposed that was because he had been her father's friend, and that she had no other person to go to — not even if she went East, to Westwood. But she would not have mentioned what had happened at the big house if Martha had not taken the initiative.

She was startled over the change that had come in Taylor. Watching him covertly as he stood near her, and following his movements as he walked around in the room, helping Bud, generously leaving her to herself and her thoughts, she looked in vain for that gentleness and subtle thoughtfulness that hitherto had seemed to distinguish him. She had admired him for his easy-going manner, the slow deliberateness of his glances, the quizzical gleam of his eyes.

But she saw him now as many of the men in this section of the country had seen him when he faced the necessity for rapid, determined action. It was the other side of his character; before she had heard his voice, and before she had seen him smile — the stern, unyielding side of him which she had discovered always was ready for the blows of adversity and enmity — his fighting side.

And when she went into the house to breakfast, feeling the strangeness of it all — of the odd fate which had led her to the Arrow; the queer reluctance that affected her over the action in accepting the hospitality of a man who — except for his association with her father — was almost a stranger to her — she found that he did not intend to insinuate his presence upon her.

He called her, and stood near the table when she and Martha went in. Then he told her gravely that the house was “hers,” and that he and Bud would live in the bunkhouse.

“And when you get settled,” he told her, as he stood in the doorway, ready to go, “we’ll write those articles of partnership. And,” he added, “don’t you go to worrying about Carrington. If he comes here, and Bud or me ain’t here, you’ll find a loaded rifle hanging behind the front door. Don’t be afraid to use it — there’s no law against killing snakes out here!”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BEAST AGAIN

CARRINGTON was conscious of the error his unrestrained passion had driven him to committing. Yet he had not been sincere when he had declared to Martha that he wouldn't bother the girl again. For after leading the two horses to Dawes and arranging for their care, he hunted up Danforth. It was nearly midnight when Danforth reached Carrington's rooms in the Castle, and Carrington was in a sullen mood.

"I want two or three men who will do what they are told and keep their mouths shut," he told Danforth. "Get them—quick—and send them to the Huggins house—mine, now—and have them stay there. Nobody is to leave the house—not even to come to town. Understand? Not even Parsons. Hustle! There is no train out of here tonight? No? Well, that's all right. Get going!"

Danforth had noticed Carrington's sullenness, and the strained excitement of his manner, and there was in Danforth's mind an inclination to warn Carrington about including the woman in the scheme to subjugate Dawes—for he knew Carrington of old; but a certain light in the

big man's eyes warned Danforth and he shut his half-opened lips and departed on his errand.

In an hour he returned, telling Carrington that his orders had been obeyed.

Danforth seated himself in a chair near one of the front windows and waited, for he knew Carrington still had something to say to him—the man's eyes told him, for they were alight with a cold, speculative gleam as they rested on Danforth.

At last, after a silence that lasted long, Carrington said, shortly:

“What do you know about Taylor?”

“What I told you before—the first day. And that isn't much.”

“I had a talk with Parsons the other day—about Larry Harlan,” said Carrington. “It seems that Larry Harlan worked for Taylor—for two or three years. I didn't question Parsons closely about the connection between Taylor and Harlan, but it seems to me that Parsons mentioned a mine. What about it? Do you know anything about it?”

Danforth related what he knew regarding the incident of the mine—the story told by Taylor when he returned after Larry Harlan's death—and Carrington's eyes gleamed with interest.

“Do you think he told a straight story?” he asked.

He watched Danforth intently.

"Hell, yes!" declared the other. "He's too square to lie!"

Five minutes later Carrington said good-night to Danforth. But Carrington did not immediately go to bed; he sat for a long time in a chair near the window looking out at the buildings of Dawes.

In the courtroom early the next morning he leaned over Judge Littlefield's desk, smiling.

"Did you ever hear of Quinton Taylor being connected with a mining venture?"

"Well, rather."

"Where?"

"At Nogel—in the Sangre de Christo Mountains."

"How far is that?"

"About ten miles—due west."

"What do you know about the mine?"

"Very little. Taylor and a man named Lawrence Harlan registered the claim here. I heard that Harlan died—was killed in an accident. Soon afterward, Taylor sold the mine—to a man named Thornton—for a consideration, not mentioned." The judge looked sharply at Carrington. "Why this inquiry?" he asked; "do you think there is anything wrong about the transaction?"

"There is no determining that until an investigation is made." Carrington laughed as he left the judge.

Later he got on his horse and rode to the big house. On the front porch, seated in a chair, smoking, he saw

one of the men Danforth had sent in obedience to his order; at the rear of the house was another; and, lounging carelessly on the grass near the edge of the butte fringing the big valley, he saw still another—men who seemed to find their work agreeable, for they grinned at Carrington when he rode up.

Carrington dismounted and entered the house—by one of the rear doors—which he had wrecked the night before. He went in boldly, grinning, for he anticipated that by this time Marion Harlan would have reached that stage of intimidation where she would no longer resist him.

At first he was only mildly disturbed at the appearance of the interior; for nothing had been done to bring order out of the chaos he had created the night before, and the condition of the furniture, and the atmosphere of gloomy emptiness that greeted him indicated nothing. The terror under which the girl had labored during the night might still be gripping her.

He had no suspicion that the girl had left the house until after he had looked into all the rooms but the one occupied by Parsons. Then a conviction that she *had* fled seized him; he scowled and leaped to the door of Parsons' room, pounding heavily upon it.

Parsons did not answer his knock, and an instant later, when Carrington forced the door and stepped into the room, he saw Parsons standing near a window, pallid and shaking.

With a bound Carrington reached Parsons' side and gripped the man by the collar of his coat.

"Where's Miss Harlan?" he demanded. He noted that Parsons swayed in his grasp, and he peered at the other with a malignant joy. He had always hated Parsons, tolerating him because of Parsons' money.

"She's gone," whispered Parsons tremulously. "I—I tried to stop her, knowing you wouldn't want it, but—she went away—anyway."

"Where?" Carrington's fingers were gripping Parsons' shoulder near the throat with a bitter, viselike strength that made the man cringe and groan from the pain of it.

"Don't, Jim; for God's sake, don't! You're hurting me! I—I couldn't help it; I couldn't stop her!"

The abject, terrified appeal in his eyes; the fawning, doglike subjection of his manner, enraged Carrington. He shook the little man with a force that racked the other from head to heel.

"Where did she go—damn you!"

"To the Arrow."

Aroused to desperation by the flaming fury that blazed in Carrington's eyes, Parsons tried to wrench himself free, tugging desperately, and whining: "Don't, Jim!" For he knew that he was to be punished for his dereliction.

He shrieked when Carrington struck him; a sound

which died in his throat as the blow landed. Carrington left him lie where he fell, and went out to the men, interrogating the one he had seen on the front porch.

From that person he learned that no one had left the house since the men had come; so that Carrington knew Marion must have departed soon after he had left the night before—or some time during the time of his departure and the arrival of the men.

Ten minutes after emerging from the house he went in again. Parsons was sitting on the floor of his room, swaying weakly back and forth, whining tonelessly, his lips loose and drooling blood.

For an instant Carrington stood over him, looking down at him with a merciless, tigerlike grin. Then he stooped, gripped Parsons by the shoulders, and, lifting him bodily, threw him across the bed. Parsons did not resist, but lay, his arms flung wide, watching the big man fearfully.

“Don’t hit me again, Jim!” he pleaded. “Jim, I’ve never done anything to you!”

“Bah!” Carrington leaned over the other, grinning malevolently.

“You’ve double-crossed me, Elam,” he said silkily. “You’re through. Get out of here before I kill you! I want to; and if you are here in five minutes, I shall kill you! Go to the Arrow—with your niece. Tell her what you know about me—if you haven’t done so al-

ready. And tell her that I am coming for her — and for Taylor, too! Now, get out!”

In less than five minutes, while Carrington was at the front of the house talking with the three men, Parsons tottered from a rear door, staggered weakly into some dense shrubbery that skirted the far side of the house, and made his slow way toward the big slope down which Marion and Martha had gone some hours before.

Retribution had descended swiftly upon Parsons; it seemed to him he was out of it, crushed and beaten. But no thread of philosophy weaved its way through the fabric of the man's complete misery and humiliation, and no reflection that he had merely reaped what he had sown glimmered in his consciousness. He was merely conscious that he had been beaten and robbed by the man who had always been his confederate, and as he reeled down the big slope on his way to the Arrow he whined and moaned in a toneless voice of vengeance — and more vengeance.

CHAPTER XIX

THE AMBUSH

THE incident of the fight between Carrington, Danforth, Judge Littlefield, and Taylor in front of the courthouse had eloquently revealed a trait of Taylor's character which was quite generally known to the people of Dawes, and which, in a great measure, accounted for Taylor's popularity.

Few of Dawes's citizens had ever seen Taylor angry. Neil Norton had seen him in a rage once, and the memory of the man's face was still vivid. A few of the town's citizens had watched him once—when he had thrashed a gunman who had insulted him—and the story of that fight still taxed the vocabularies of those who had witnessed it. One enthusiastic watcher, at the conclusion of the fight, had picturesquely termed Taylor a "regular he-wolf in a scrap;" and thus there was written into the traditions of the town a page of his history which carried the lesson, repeated by many tongues:

"Don't rile Taylor!"

Riding into Dawes about two hours after he had heard from Marion Harlan the story of the attack on her by Carrington, Taylor's face was set and grim. His ancient

hatred of Carrington was intensified by another passion that had burned its way into his heart, filling it with a primitive lust to destroy—jealousy.

He dismounted in front of the Castle Hotel, and, entering, he asked the clerk where he could find Carrington. The clerk could give him no information, and Taylor went out, the clerk's puzzled gaze following him.

"Evidently he doesn't want to congratulate Carrington about anything," the clerk confided to a bystander.

Mounting his horse, Taylor rode down the street to the building which Danforth had selected as a place from which to administer the government of Dawes. A gilt sign over the front bore upon it the words:

CITY HALL.

Taylor went inside, and found Danforth seated at a desk. The latter looked sourly at his visitor until he caught a glimpse of his eyes, then his face paled, and he sat silent until Taylor spoke:

"Where's Carrington?"

"I haven't seen Carrington this morning," lied Danforth, for he *had* seen Carrington some time before, riding out of town toward the Huggins house. He suspected Carrington's errand was in some way concerned with the three men who had been sent there. But he divined from the expression in Taylor's eyes that trouble between Taylor and Carrington was imminent, and he

would not set Taylor on the other's trail without first warning Carrington.

He met Taylor's straight, cold look of disbelief with a vindictive smirk, which grew venomous as Taylor wheeled and walked out. Taylor had not gone far when Danforth called a man to his side, whispered rapidly to him, telling him to hurry. Later the man slipped out of the rear door of the building, mounted a horse, and rode hurriedly down the river trail toward the Huggins house.

Taylor rode to the *Eagle* office, but Norton was not there, and so, pursuing his quest, Taylor looked into saloons and stores, and various other places. Men who knew him noted his taciturnity — for he spoke little except to greet a friend here and there shortly — and commented upon his abrupt manner.

"What's up with Taylor?" asked a man who knew him. "Looks sort of riled."

Taylor found Carrington in none of the places in which he looked. He returned to the *Eagle* office, and found Norton there. He greeted Norton with a short:

"Seen Carrington?"

"Why, yes." Norton peered closely at his friend. "What in blazes is wrong?" His thoughts went to another time, when he had seen Taylor as he appeared now, and he drew a deep breath.

Briefly Taylor told him, and when the tale was ended, Norton's eyes were blazing with indignation.

"So, that's the kind of a whelp he is!" he said. "Well," he added, "I saw him go out on the river trail a while ago; it's likely he's gone to the Huggins house."

"His—now," said Taylor; "that's what makes it worse. Well," he added as he stepped toward the door, "I'll be going."

"Be careful, Squint," warned Norton, placing a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I know you can lick him—and I hope you give him all that's coming to him. But watch him—he's tricky!" He paused. "If you need any help—someone to go with you, to keep an eye——"

"It's a one-man job," grinned Taylor mirthlessly.

"You'll promise you won't be thinking of that ankle—this time?" said Norton seriously.

Taylor permitted himself a faint smile. "That's all explained now," he said. "She's been a lot generous—and forgiving. No," he added, "I won't be thinking of that ankle—now!"

And then, his lips setting again, he crossed the sidewalk, mounted Spotted Tail, and rode through town to the river trail. Watching him, Norton saw him disappear in some timber that fringed the river.

Carrington had finished his talk with the three men he had set to guard the Huggins house. The men were told to stay until they received orders from Carrington

to leave. And they were to report to him immediately if anyone came.

Carrington had watched Parsons go down the big slope; and for a long time after he had finished his talk with the three men he stood on the front porch of the house watching the progress made by Parsons through the basin.

"Following Marion," Carrington assured himself, with a crooked smile. "Well, I'll know where to get both of them when I want them."

Carrington felt not the slightest tremor of pity for Parsons. He laughed deep in his throat with a venomous joy as he saw Parsons slowly making his way through the big basin; for he knew Parsons—he knew that the craven nature of the man would prevent him from attempting any reprisal of a vigorous character.

Yet the exultation in the big man's heart was dulled with a slight regret for his ruthless attack on Marion Harlan. He should not have been so eager, he told himself; he should have waited; he should have insinuated himself into her good graces, and then——

Scowling, he got on his horse and rode up the Dawes trail, shouting a last word of caution to the three men—one seated on the front porch, the other two lounging in the shade of a tree near by.

Half a mile from the house, riding through a timber grove, he met the man Danforth had sent to him. The

latter gave Carrington the message he carried, which was merely: "Taylor is looking for you."

"Coming here?" he asked the man sharply.

"I reckon he will be—if he can't find you in town," said the man. "Danforth said Taylor was a heap fussed up, an' killin' mad!"

A grayish pallor stole over Carrington's face, and he drew a quick breath, sending a rapid, dreading glance up the Dawes trail. Then, coincident with a crafty backward look—toward the Huggins house—the grayish pallor receded and a rush of color suffused his face. He spoke shortly to the man:

"Sneak back—by a roundabout trail. Don't let Taylor see you!"

He watched while the man urged his horse deep into the fringing timber. Carrington could see him for a time as he rode, and then, when horse and rider had vanished, Carrington wheeled his horse and sent it clattering back along the trail to the big house.

Arriving there, he called the three men to him and talked fast to them. The talk ended, the men ran for their horses, and a few minutes later they raced up the river trail toward Dawes, their faces grim, their eyes alert.

About a mile up the trail, where a wood of spruce and fir-balsam spread dark shadows over the ground, and an almost impenetrable growth of brush fringed the narrow,

winding path over which any rider going to the big house must pass, they separated, two plunging deep into the brush on one side, and one man secreting himself on the other side.

They urged their horses far back, where they could not be seen. And then, concealing themselves behind convenient bushes, they waited, their eyes trained on the Dawes trail, their ears attuned to catch the slightest sound that might come from that direction.

Back at the big house—having arranged the ambuscade—Carrington drew a deep breath of relief and smiled evilly. He thought he knew why Taylor was looking for him. Marion had gone to the Arrow, to tell Taylor what had happened at the big house, and Taylor, in a jealous rage, intended to punish him. Well, Taylor could come now.

CHAPTER XX

A FIGHT TO A FINISH

AND Taylor was "coming." The big black horse he was riding — which he had named "Spotted Tail" because of the white blotches that startlingly relieved his somber sable coat — was never in better condition. He stepped lightly, running in long, smooth leaps down the narrow trail, champing at the bit, keen of eye, alert, eager, snorting his impatience over the tight rein his rider kept on him.

But Spotted Tail was not more eager than his rider. Taylor, however, knowing that at any instant he might run plump into Carrington, returning from the big house, was forced to restrain his impatience. Therefore, except on the straight reaches of the trail, he was forced to pull the black down.

But they were traveling fast when they reached the timber grove in which Carrington's men were concealed; and yet on the damp earth of the trail, where the sunlight could not penetrate, and where the leaves of past summers had fallen, to rot and weave a pulpy carpet, the rush of Spotted Tail's passing created little sound.

Within a hundred feet of the spot where Carrington's

men were concealed, Spotted Tail shot his ears forward stiffly and raised his muzzle inquiringly. Taylor, noting the action, and suspecting that instinct had warned Spotted Tail of the approach of another horse, drew the animal down and rode forward at a walk, for he felt that it must be Carrington's horse which was approaching.

Rounding a sharp turn in the trail, Taylor could look ahead for perhaps a hundred feet. He saw no rider advancing toward him, and he leaned forward, slapping the black's neck in playful reproach.

As he moved he heard the heavy crash of a pistol shot and felt the bullet sing past his head. Another pistol barked venomously from some brush on his right, and still another from his left.

But none of the bullets struck Taylor. For the black horse, startled by Taylor's playful movement when all his senses were strained to detect the location of his kind on the trail, had made an involuntary forward leap, thus whisking his rider out of the line of fire. And before either of the three men could shoot again, Spotted Tail had flashed down the trail—a streak of somber black against the green background of the trees.

He fled over the hundred feet of straight trail and had vanished around a bend before the Carrington men could move their weapons around impeding branches of the brush that covered them. There was no stopping Spotted Tail now, for he was in a frenzy of terror—and

he made a mere rushing black blot as he emerged from the timber and fled across an open space toward another wood—the wood that surrounded the big house.

Standing on the front porch of the big house, nervously smoking a cigar, his face set in sullen lines, his eyes fixed on the Dawes trail, Carrington heard the shots. He sighed, grinned maliciously, and relaxed his vigilance.

“He’s settled by now,” he said.

He looked at one of the chairs standing on the porch, thought of sitting in one of them to await the coming of the three men, decided he was too impatient to sit, and began walking back and forth on the porch.

He had thrown a half-smoked cigar away and was lighting another when he saw a black blot burst from the edge of a timber-clump beyond an open space. The match flared and went out as Carrington held it to the end of the cigar, for there was something strangely familiar in the shape of the black blot—even with it heading directly toward him. An instant later, the blot looming larger in his vision, Carrington dropped cigar and match and stood staring with wild, fear-haunted eyes at the rushing black horse.

Carrington stood motionless a little longer—until the black horse, its rider sitting straight in the saddle, in cowboy fashion, reached the edge of the wood surrounding the house. Then Carrington, cursing, his lips in a hideous pout, drew a pistol from a hip-pocket. And when the

black horse was within fifty feet of him, and still coming at a speed which there was no gauging, Carrington leveled the pistol.

Once—twice—three, four, five, six times he pulled the trigger of the weapon. Carrington saw a grim, mocking smile on the rider's face, and knew none of his bullets had taken effect.

Unarmed now, he was suddenly stricken with a panic of fear; and while the rider of the black horse was dismounting at the edge of the porch, Carrington dove for the front door of the house and vanished inside, slamming the door behind him, directly in the rider's face.

When Taylor threw the door open he saw Carrington, far back in the room, swinging a chair over his head. At Taylor's appearance he threw the chair with all the force his frenzy of fear could put into the effort. Taylor ducked, and the chair flew past him, sailing uninterruptedly outside and over the porch railing.

Carrington ran through the big front room, through the next room—the sitting-room—knocking chairs over in his flight, throwing a big center table at his silent, implacable pursuer. He slammed the sitting-room door and tried to lock it, but he could not turn the key quickly enough, and Taylor burst the door open, almost plunging against Carrington as he came through it.

Carrington ran into the dining-room, shoved the dining-room table in Taylor's way as Taylor tried to reach

him; but Taylor leaped over the obstruction, and when Carrington dodged into Marion Harlan's room, Taylor was so close that he might have grasped the big man.

Taylor had said no word. The big man saw two guns swinging at Taylor's hips, and he wondered vaguely why the man did not use them. It occurred to Carrington as he plunged through Marion Harlan's room into Martha's, and from there to the kitchen, and back again to the dining-room, that Taylor was not going to shoot him, and his panic partially left him.

And yet there was a gleam in Taylor's eyes that made his soul cringe in terror — the cold, bitter fury of a peace-loving man thoroughly aroused.

Twice, as Taylor pursued Carrington through the sitting-room again and into another big room that adjoined it, Carrington's courage revived long enough to permit him to consider making a stand against Taylor, but each time as he stiffened with the determination, the terrible rage in Taylor's eyes dissuaded him, and he continued to evade the clash.

But he knew that the clash must come, and when, in their rapid, headlong movements, Carrington came close to the front door and tried to slip out of it, Taylor lunged against him and struck at him, the fist just grazing Carrington's jaw, the big man understood that Taylor was intent on beating him with his fists.

Had it not been for his previous encounter with Taylor,

Carrington would not have hesitated, for he knew how to protect himself in a fight; but there was something in Taylor's eyes now to add to the memory of that other fight, and Carrington wanted no more of it.

But at last he was forced to stand. Ducking to evade the blow aimed at his jaw when he tried to dart out of the front door, he slipped. Reeling, in an effort to regain his equilibrium, he plunged into another big room. It was a room that was little used—an old-fashioned parlor, kept trim and neat against the coming of visitors, but a room whose gloominess the occupants of the house usually avoided.

The shades were down, partly concealing heavy wooden blinds—which were closed. And the only light in the room was that which came from a little square window high up in the side wall.

Before Carrington could regain his balance Taylor had entered the room. He closed the door behind him, placed his back against it, locked it, and grinned feline at the big man.

"Your men are coming, Carrington," he said—"hear them?" In the silence that followed his words both stood, listening to the beat of hoofs near the house. "They'll be trying to get in here in a minute," went on Taylor. "But before they get in I'm going to knock your head off!" And without further warning he was upon Carrington, striking bitterly.

It seemed to Carrington that the man was endowed with a savage strength entirely out of proportion to his stature, and that he was able to start terrific, deadening blows from any angle. For though Carrington was a strong man and had had some fighting experience, he could neither evade Taylor's blows nor stand against the impact of them.

He went reeling around the room under the impetus of Taylor's terrible rushes, struggling to defend himself, to dodge, to clinch, to evade somehow the fists that were flying at him from all directions. He could not get an instant's respite in which to set himself. Three times in succession he was knocked down so heavily that the house shook with the crash of his body striking the floor, and each time when he got to his feet he tried to fight Taylor off in an endeavor to set himself for a blow. But he could not. He was knocked against the walls of the room, and hammered away from them with stiff, jolty, venomous blows that jarred him from head to heels. He tried vainly to cover up — with his arms locked about his head he crouched and tried to rush Taylor off his feet, knowing he was stronger than the other, and that his only hope was in clinching. But Taylor held him off with savage uppercuts and terrific short-arm swings that smashed his lips.

He began to mutter in a whining, vicious monotone; twice he kicked at Taylor, and twice he was knocked down

as a punishment for his foul methods. Finding his methods ineffectual, and discovering that covering his face with his arms did not materially lessen the punishment he was receiving, he began to stand up straight, taking blows in an effort to land one.

But Taylor eluded him; Carrington's blows did not land. Raging and muttering, roaring with impotent passion, he whipped the air with his arms, almost jerking them out of their sockets.

Stiff and taut, his muscles accommodating themselves to every demand he made on them, and in perfect coordination with his brain—and the purpose of his brain to inflict upon Carrington the maximum of punishment for his dastardly attack on Marion Harlan—Taylor worked fast and furiously. For he heard Carrington's three men in the next room; he heard them try the door; heard them call to Carrington.

And then, convinced that the fight must be ended quickly, before the men should break down the door and have him at a disadvantage, Taylor finished it. He smothered Carrington with a succession of stiff-arm, straight punches that glazed the other's eyes and sent him reeling around the room. And, at last, over in a corner near the little window, Carrington went down flat on his back, his eyes closed, his arms flung wide.

Panting from his exertions, Taylor drew his guns and ran to one of the front windows. They opened upon the

porch, and, peering through the blinds, Taylor saw one of the men standing at one of the windows, trying to peer into the room. The other two, Taylor knew, were at the door—he could hear them talking in the silence that had followed the final falling of Carrington.

With a gun in each hand, Taylor approached the door. He was compelled to sheath one of the guns, finding that it interfered with the turning of the key in the lock; and he had sheathed it and was slowly turning the key, intending to throw the door open suddenly and take his chance with the two men on the other side of it, when he saw a shadow darken the little window above where Carrington lay.

He wheeled quickly, saw a man's face at the window, caught the glint of a pistol. He snapped a shot at the man, swinging his gun over his head to keep it from striking the door as he turned. But at the movement the man's pistol roared, glass tinkling on the floor with the report. The air in the room rocked with the explosion of Taylor's pistol, but a heavy blow on Taylor's left shoulder, accompanied by a twinge of pain, as though a white-hot iron had suddenly been plunged through it, spoiled Taylor's aim, and his bullet went into the ceiling. As he staggered back from the door he saw the man's face at the window, set in a triumphant grin. Then, as Taylor flattened against the wall to steady himself for another shot, the face disappeared.

For an instant Taylor rested against the wall, his arms outstretched along it to keep himself from falling, for the bullet which had struck him had hurt him badly. The wound was in the left shoulder, though, and high, and therefore not dangerous, yet he knew it had robbed his left arm of most of its strength—there was no feeling in the fingers that groped along the wall.

He stepped again to the door and softly turned the key in the lock. He heard no sound in the room beyond the door, and, thinking that the men, curious over the shooting, had gone outside, he jerked the door open.

The movement was greeted with deafening report and a smoke-streak that blinded Taylor momentarily. In just the instant before the smoke-streak Taylor had caught a glimpse of a man standing near the center of the room beyond the door, and though he was rather disconcerted by the powder-flash and the searing of his left cheek by a bullet, he let his own gun off twice in as many seconds, and had the grim satisfaction of seeing the man stagger and tumble headlong to the floor.

Taylor peered once at the man, to see if he needed further attention, decided he did not, and ran toward the front door, which opened upon the porch.

He was just in time to see one of Carrington's men sticking his head around a corner of the house. It was the man who had shot him from the little window. Taylor's gun and the man's roared simultaneously. Taylor

had missed, for the man dodged back, and Taylor staggered, for the man's bullet had struck him in the left thigh. He leaped, though limping, toward the corner, and when almost there a pistol crashed behind him, the bullet hitting his left shoulder, near where the other had gone in, the force of it spinning him clear around, so that he reeled and brought up against a porch column where it joined the rail.

Grimly setting himself, grinning bitterly with the realization that the men had him between them, Taylor stood momentarily, fighting to overcome the terrible weakness that had stolen over him. His knees were trembling, the house, trees, and sky were agitated in sickening convolutions, and yet when he saw the head of a man appear from around a corner of the house at his right, he snapped a shot at it, and instantly as it was withdrawn he staggered to the corner, lurching heavily as he went, and turning just as he reached it to reply to a shot sent at him from the other corner of the house.

A smoke-spurt met him as he reeled around the corner nearest him, and his knees sagged as he aimed his gun at a blurring figure in front of him. He saw the man go down, but his own strength was spent, and he knew the last bullet had struck him in a vital spot.

Staggering drunkenly, he started for the side of the house and brought up against it with a crash. Again, as he had done inside the house, he stretched his arms

out, flattening himself against the wall, but this time the arms were hanging more limply.

He was seeing things through a crimson haze, and raising a hand, he wiped his eyes—and could see better, though there was a queer dimness in his vision and the world was still traveling in eccentric circles.

He saw a blur in front of him—two men, he thought, though he knew he had accounted for two of the three gunmen who had followed him to the house. Then he heard a laugh—coarse and brutal—in a voice that he knew—Carrington's.

With heartbreaking effort he brought up his right hand, bearing the pistol. He was trying to swing it around to bring it to bear upon one of the two dancing figures in front of him, when a crushing blow landed on his head, and he knew one of the men had struck him with a fist. He felt his own weapon go off at last—it seemed he had been an age pressing on the trigger—and he heard a voice again—Carrington's—saying: "Damn him; he's shot me!" He laughed aloud as a gun roared close to him; he felt another twinge of pain somewhere around where the other twinges had come—or on the other side—he did not know; and he sank slowly, still pressing the trigger of his pistol, though not knowing whether or not he was doing any damage. And then the eccentrically whirling world became a black blur, soundless and void.

CHAPTER XXI

A MAN FACES DEATH

TAYLOR'S last shot, when he had been automatically pressing the trigger after Carrington had struck him viciously with his fist, had brought down the last of the three men who had ambushed him. And one of his last bullets had struck Carrington, who had recovered consciousness and staggered out of the house in time to see the end of the fight. And the big man, in a black, malignant fury of hatred, was staggering toward Taylor, lifting a foot to kick him, when from the direction of the clearing in front of the house came a voice, hoarse and vibrant with a cold, deadly rage:

"One kick an' I blow the top of your head off!"

Carrington stopped short and wheeled, to face Ben Mullarky.

The Irishman's eyes were blazing with wrath, and as he came forward, peering at the figures lying on the ground near the house, Carrington retreated, holding up his hands.

"Three of ye pilin' on one, eh?" said Mullarky as he looked down at Taylor, huddled against the side of the house. "An' ye got him, too, didn't ye? I've a

down big notion to blow the top of your head off, anny way. Ye slope, ye big limb of the divvle, or I'll do it!"

Mullarky watched while Carrington mounted his horse and rode up the river trail toward Dawes, and the instant Carrington was out of sight, Mullarky was down on his knees beside Taylor, taking a lightning inventory of his wounds.

"Four of them, looks like!" he mutterd thickly, his voice shaking with pity for the slack, limp, smoke-blackened figure that lay silent, the trace of a smile on its face. "An' two of them through the shoulder!" He paused, awed. "Lord, what a shindy!"

Then, swiftly gulping down his sympathy and his rage, Mullarky ran to his horse, which he had left at the edge of the wood when he had heard the shooting. He led the animal back to where Taylor lay, tenderly lifted Taylor in his arms, walked to the horse, and after much labor got Taylor up in front of him on the horse, Taylor's weight resting on his legs, the man's head and shoulders resting against him, to ease the jars of the journey.

Then he started, traveling as swiftly as possible down the big slope toward his own house, not so very far away.

Spotted Tail, jealously watching his master, saw him lifted to the back of the other horse. Shrewdly suspecting that all was not going well, and that his master would need him presently, Spotted Tail trotted after Mullarky.

In this manner, with Spotted Tail a few paces in his rear, Mullarky, still tenderly carrying his burden, reached his cabin.

He stilled Mrs. Mullarky's hysterical questions with a short command:

"Hitch up the buckboard while I'm gettin' him in shape!"

And then, while Mrs. Mullarky did as she was bidden, Mullarky carried Taylor inside the cabin, bathed his wounds, stanching the flow of blood as best he could — and came out again, carrying Taylor, and placed him in the bed of the light spring-wagon, upon some quilts — and upon a pillow that Mrs. Mullarky ran into the house to get, emerging with the reproach:

"You'd be lettin' him ride on them hard boards!"

Following Mullarky's instructions, Mrs. Mullarky climbed to the driver's seat and sent the buckboard toward the Arrow, driving as fast as she thought she dared. And Ben Mullarky, on Spotted Tail, turned his face toward Dawes, riding as he had never ridden before.

Parsons had reached the Arrow shortly after Taylor had departed for Dawes. The man had stopped at the Mullarky cabin to inquire the way from the lady, and she had frankly commented upon Parsons' battered appearance.

"So it was Carrington that mauled you, eh?" she said.

"Well, he's a mighty evil man—the divvle take his sowl!"

Parsons concurred in this view of Carrington, though he did not tell Mrs. Mullarky so. He went on his way, refusing the good woman's proffer of a horse, for he wanted to go afoot to the Arrow. He felt sure of Marion's sympathy, but he wanted to make himself as pitiable an object as possible. And as he walked toward the Arrow he mentally dramatized the moment of his appearance at the ranchhouse—a bruised and battered figure dragging itself wearily forward, dusty, thirst-tortured, and despairing. He knew that spectacle would win the girl's swift sympathy. The fact that the girl herself had been through almost the same experience did not affect him at all—he did not even think of it.

And when Parsons reached the Arrow the scene was even as he had dreamed it—Marion Harlan had seen him from afar, and came running to him, placing an arm about him, helping him forward, whispering words of sympathy in his ears, so that Parsons really began to look upon himself as a badly abused martyr.

Marion cared for him tenderly, once she got him into the ranchhouse. She bathed his bruised face, prepared breakfast for him, and later, learning from him that he had not slept during the night, she sent him off to bed, asking him as he went into the room if he had seen Ben Mullarky.

"For," she added, "he came here early this morning, after Mr. Taylor left, and I sent him to the big house to get some things for me."

But Parsons had not seen Mullarky.

And at last, when the morning was nearly gone, and Marion saw a horse-drawn vehicle approaching the Arrow from the direction of Dawes, she ran out, thinking Ben Mullarky had brought her "things" in his buckboard. But it was not Ben who was coming, but Mrs. Mullarky. The lady's face was very white and serious, and when the girl came close and she saw the look on the good woman's face, she halted in her tracks and stood rigid, her own face paling.

"Why, Mrs. Mullarky, what has happened?"

"Enough, deary." Mrs. Mullarky waved an eloquent hand toward the rear of the buckboard, and slowly approaching, the girl saw the huddled figure lying there, swathed in quilts.

She drew her breath sharply, and with pallid face, swaying a little, she walked to the rear of the buckboard and stood, holding hard to the rim of a wheel, looking down at Taylor's face with its closed eyes and its ghastly color.

She must have screamed, then, for she felt Mrs. Mullarky's arms around her, and she heard the lady's voice, saying: "Don't, deary; he ain't dead, yet — an' he won't die — we won't let him die."

She stood there by the buckboard for a time—until Mrs. Mullarky, running to one of the outbuildings, returned with Bud Hemmingway. Then, nerved to the ordeal by Bud's businesslike methods, and the awful profanity that gushed from his clenched teeth, she helped them carry Taylor into the house.

They took Taylor into his own room and laid him on the bed; a long, limp figure, pitifully shattered, lying very white and still.

The girl stayed in the room while Mrs. Mullarky and Bud ran hither and thither getting water, cloths, stimulants, and other indispensable articles. And during one of their absences the girl knelt beside the bed, and resting **her** head close to Taylor's—with her hands stroking his **blackened** face—she whispered:

“O Lord, save him—save him for—for me!”

CHAPTER XXII

LOOKING FOR TROUBLE

BEFORE night the Arrow outfit, led by Bothwell, the range boss, came into the ranchhouse. For the news had reached them—after the manner in which all news travels in the cow-country—by word of mouth—and they had come in—all those who could be spared—to determine the truth of the rumor.

There were fifteen of them, rugged, capable-looking fellows; and despite the doctor's objections, they filed singly, though noiselessly, into Taylor's room and silently looked down upon their "boss." Marion, watching them from a corner of the room, noted their quick gulps of pity, their grim faces, the savage gleams that came into their eyes, and she knew they were thinking of vengeance upon the men who had wrought the injury to their employer.

Bothwell—big, grim, and deliberate of manner—said nothing as he looked down into his chief's face. But later, outside the house, listening to Bud Hemmingway's recital of how Taylor had been brought to the ranchhouse, Bothwell said shortly:

"I'm takin' a look!"

Shortly afterward, followed by every man of the outfit who had ridden in with him, Bothwell crossed the big basin and sent his horse up the long slope to the big house.

Outside they came upon the bodies of the two men with whom Taylor had fought. And inside the house they saw the other huddled on the floor near a door in the big front room. Silently the men filed through the house, looking into all the rooms, and noting the wreck and ruin that had been wrought. They saw the broken glass of the little window through which one of Carrington's men had fired the first shot; they noted the hole in the ceiling — caused by a bullet from Taylor's pistol; and they saw another hole in the wall near the door beside which Taylor had been standing just before he had swung the door open.

"Three of them — an' Carrington — accordin' to what Bud says," said Bothwell. "That's four." He smiled bitterly. "They got him all right — almost, I reckon. But from the looks of things they must have had a roarin' picnic doin' it!"

Not disturbing anything, the entire outfit mounted and rode swiftly down the Dawes trail, their hearts swelling with sympathy for Taylor and passionate hatred for Carrington, "itching for a clean-up," as one sullen-looking member of the outfit described his feelings.

But there was no "clean-up." When they reached Dawes they found the town quiet — and men who saw them gave them plenty of room and forebore to argue with

them. For it was known that they were reckless, hardy spirits when the mood came upon them, and that they worshiped Taylor.

And so they entered Dawes, and Dawes treated them with respect. Passing the city hall, they noticed some men grouped in front of the building, and they halted, Bothwell dismounting and entering.

"What's the gang collectin' for?" he asked a man—whom he knew for Danforth. There was a belligerent thrust to Bothwell's chin, and a glare in his eyes that, Danforth felt, must be met with diplomacy.

"There's been trouble at the Huggins house, and I'm sending these men to investigate."

"Give them diggin' tools," said Bothwell grimly. "An' remember this—if there's any more herd-ridin' of our boss the Arrow outfit is startin' a private graveyard!" He pinned the mayor with a cold glare: "Where's Carrington?"

"In his rooms—under a doctor's care. He's hit—bad. A bullet in his side."

"Ought to be in his gizzard!" growled Bothwell. He went out, mounted, and led his men away. They were reluctant to leave town, but Bothwell was insistent. "They ain't no fight in that bunch of plug-uglies!" he scoffed. "We'll go back an' 'tend to business, an' pull for the boss to get well!"

And so they returned to the Arrow, to find that the

Dawes doctor was still with Taylor. The doctor sent out word to them that there was a slight chance for his patient, and satisfied that they had done all they could, they rode away, to attend to "business."

For the first time in her life Marion Harlan was witnessing the fight of a strong man to live despite grievous wounds that, she was certain, would have instantly killed most men. But Taylor fought his fight unconsciously, for he was still in that deep coma that had descended upon him when he had gently slipped to the ground beside the house, still fighting, still scorning the efforts of his enemies to finish him.

And during the first night's fever he still fought; the powerful sedatives administered by the doctor had little effect. In his delirium he muttered such terms and phrases as these: "Run, damn you—run! I ain't in any hurry, and I'll get you!" And—"I'll certainly smash you some!" And—"A 'thing,' eh—I'll show you! She's mine, you miserable whelp!"

Whether these were thoughts, or whether they were memories of past utterances, made vivid and brought into the present by the fever, the girl did not know. She sat beside his bed all night, with the doctor near her, waiting and watching and listening.

And she heard more: "That's Larry's girl, and it's up to me to protect her." And—"I knew she'd look like

that." Also—"They're both tryin' to send her to hell! But I'll fool them!" 'At these times there was ineffable tenderness in his voice. But at times he broke out in terrible wrath. "Ambush me, eh? Ha, ha! That was right clever of you, Spotted Tail—we didn't make a good target, did we? Only for your sense we'd have—" He ceased, to begin anew: "I've got *you*—damn you!" And then he would try to sit erect, swinging his arms as though he were trying to hit someone.

But toward morning he fell into a fitful sleep—the sleep of exhaustion; and when the dawn came, Mrs. Mul-larky ordered the girl, pale and wan from her night's vigilance and service, to "go to bed."

For three days it was the same. And for three days the doctor stayed at the side of the patient, only sleeping when Miss Harlan watched over Taylor.

And during the three days' vigil, Taylor's delirium lasted. The girl learned more of his character during those three days of constant watchfulness than she would have learned in as many years otherwise. That he was honorable and courageous, she knew; but that he was so sincerely apprehensive over her welfare she had never suspected. For she learned through his ravings that he had fought Carrington and the three men for her; that he had deliberately sought Carrington to punish him for the attack on her, and that he had not considered his own danger at all.

And at the beginning of the fourth day, when he opened his eyes and stared wonderingly about the room, his gaze at first resting upon the doctor, and then traveling to the girl's face, and remaining there for a long time, while a faint smile wreathed his lips, the girl's heart beat high with delight.

"Well, I'm still a going it," he said weakly.

"I remember," he went on, musingly. "When they was handing it to me, I was thinking that I was in pretty bad shape. And then they must have handed it to me some more, for I quit thinking at all. I'm going to pull through—ain't I?"

"You are!" declared the doctor. "That is," he amended, "if you keep your trap shut and do a lot of sleeping."

"For which I'm going to have a lot of time," smiled Taylor. "I'm going to sleep, for I feel mighty like sleeping. But before I do any sleeping, there's a thing I want to know. Did Carrington's men—the last two—get away, or did I——"

"You did," grinned the doctor. "Bothwell rode over there to find out—and Mullarky saw them. Mullarky brought you back—and got me."

"Carrington?" inquired the patient.

"Mullarky saw him. He says he never saw a man so beat up in his life. Besides, you shot him, too—in the side. Not dangerous, but a heap painful."

Taylor smiled and looked at Miss Harlan. "I knew you were here," he said; "I've felt you near me. It was mighty comforting, and I want to thank you for it. There were times when I must have shot off my mouth a heap. If I said anything I shouldn't have said, I'm a whole lot sorry. And I'm asking your pardon."

"You didn't," she said, her eyes eloquent with joy over the improvement in him.

"Well, then, I'm going to sleep." He raised his right hand—his good one—and waved it gayly at them—and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER XXIII

A WORLD-OLD LONGING

LOOKING back upon the long period of Taylor's convalescence, Marion Harlan could easily understand why she had surrendered to the patient.

In the first place, she had liked Taylor from the very beginning—even when she had affected to ridicule him on the train coming toward Dawes. She had known all along that she had liked him, and on that morning when she had visited the Arrow to ask about her father Taylor had woven a magnetic spell about her.

That meeting and the succeeding ones had merely strengthened her liking for him. But the inevitable intimacy between nurse and patient during several long weeks of convalescence had wrought havoc with her heart.

Taylor's unfailing patience and good humor had been another factor in bringing about her surrender. It was hard for her to believe that he had fought a desperate battle which had resulted in the death of three men and the wounding of Carrington and himself; for there were no savage impulses or passions gleaming in the eyes that followed her every movement while she had been busy in the sickroom for some weeks. Nor could she see any

lingering threat in them, promising more violence upon his recovery. He seemed to have forgotten that there had been a fight, and during the weeks that she had been close to him he had not even mentioned it. He had been content, it seemed, to lounge in a chair and listen to her while she read, to watch her; and there had been times when she had seen a glow in his eyes that told her things that she longed to hear him say.

The girl's surrender had not been conveyed to Taylor in words, though she was certain he knew of it; for the signs of it must have been visible, since she could feel the blushes in her cheeks at times when a word or a look passing between them was eloquent with the proof of her aroused emotions.

It was on a morning about six weeks following the incident of the shooting that she and Taylor had walked to the river. Upon a huge flat rock near the edge of a slight promontory they seated themselves, Taylor turned slightly, so that she had only a profile view of him.

Taylor's thoughts were grave. For from where he and the girl sat — far beyond the vast expanse of green-brown grass that carpeted the big level — he could see a huge cleft in some mountains. And the sight of that cleft sent Taylor's thoughts leaping back to the days he and Larry Harlan had spent in these mountains, searching for — and finding — that gold for which they had come. And inevitably as the contemplation of the mountains brought

him recollections of Larry Harlan he was reminded of his obligation to his old-time partner. And the difficulties of discharging that obligation were increasing, it seemed.

At least, Taylor's duty was not quite clear to him. For while Parsons still retained a place in the girl's affections he could not turn over to her Larry's share of the money he had received from the sale of the mine.

And Parsons did retain the girl's affections—likewise her confidence and trust. A man must be blind who could not see that. For the girl looked after him as any dutiful girl might care for a father she loved. Her attitude toward the man puzzled Taylor, for, he assured himself, if she would but merely study the man's face perfunctorily she could not have failed to see the signs of deceit and hypocrisy in it. All of which convinced Taylor of the truth of the old adage: "Love is blind."

One other influence which dissuaded Taylor from an impulse to turn over Larry's money to the girl was his determination to win her on his own merits. That might have seemed selfishness on his part, but now that the girl was at the Arrow he could see that she was well supplied with everything she needed. Her legacy would not buy her more than he would give her gratuitously. And he did not want her to think for a single moment he was trying to buy her love. That, to his mind was gross commercialism.

Marion was not looking at the mountains; she was

watching Taylor's profile—and blushing over thoughts that came to her.

For she wished that she might have met him under different conditions—upon a basis of equality. And that was not the basis upon which they stood now. She had come to the Arrow because she had no other place to go, vindicating her action upon Taylor's declaration that he had been her father's friend.

That had been a tangible premise, and was sufficient to satisfy, or to dull, any surface scruples *he* might have had regarding the propriety of the action. But her own moral sense struck deeper than that. She felt she had no right to be here; that Taylor had made the offer of a partnership out of charity. And so long as she stayed here, dependent upon him for food and shelter, she could not permit him to speak a word of love to her—much as she wanted him to speak it. Such was the puritanical principle driven deep into the moral fabric of her character by a mother who had set her a bad example.

This man had fought for her; he had risked his life to punish a man who had wronged her in thought, only; and she knew he loved her. And yet, seated so near him, she could not put out the hand that longed to touch him.

However, her thoughts were not tragic—far from it! Youth is hopeful because it has so long to wait. And there was in her heart at this moment a presentiment that

time would sever the bonds of propriety that held her. And the instincts of her sex — though never having been tested in the arts of coquetry — told her how to keep his heart warm toward her until that day, having achieved her independence, she could meet him on a basis of equality.

"Mr. Squint," she suddenly demanded; "what are you thinking about?"

He turned and looked full at her, his eyes glowing with a grave humor.

"I'd tell you if I thought you'd listen to me," he returned, significantly. "But it seems that every time I get on that subject you poke fun at me. Is there *anything* I can do to show you that I love you — that I want you more than any man ever wanted a woman?"

"Yes — there is." Her smile was tantalizing.

"Name it!" he demanded, eagerly.

"Stop being tragic. I don't like you when you are tragic — or when you are talking nonsense about love. I have heard so much of it!"

"From me, I suppose?" he said, gloomily.

He had turned his head and she shot a quick, eloquent glance at him. "From you — and several others," she said, deliberately.

There was a resentful, hurt look in his eyes when he turned and looked at her. "Just how many?" he demanded, somewhat gruffly.

"Jealous!" she said, shaking her finger at him. "Do you want a bill of particulars? Because if you do," she added, looking demurely downward, "I should have to take several days to think it over. You see, a woman can't catalogue everything men say to her — for they say so many silly things!"

"Love isn't silly," he declared. He looked rather fiercely at her. "What kind of a man do you like best?" he demanded.

She blushed. "I like a big man—about as big as you," she said. "A man with fierce eyes that glower at a woman when she talks to him of love—she insisting that she hasn't quite fallen in love—with *him*. I like a man who is jealous of the reputation of the woman he *professes* to love; a man who is jealous of other men; a man who isn't so very good-looking, but who is a handsome man for all that—because he is so very manly; a man who will fight and risk his life for me."

"Could you name such a man?" he said. There was a scornful gleam in his eyes.

"I am looking at him this minute!" she said.

Grinning, for he knew all along that she had been talking of him, he wheeled quickly and tried to catch her in his arms. But she slipped off the rock and was around on the other side of it, keeping it between them while he tried to catch her. Instinctively he realized that the chase was hopeless, but he persisted.

"I'll never speak to you again if you catch me!" she warned, her eyes flashing.

"But you told me——"

"That I liked you," she interrupted. "And liking a man isn't——"

And then she paused and looked down, blushing, while Taylor, in the act of vaulting over the rock, collapsed and sat on it instead, red of face and embarrassed.

For within a dozen paces of them, and looking rather embarrassed and self-conscious, himself, though with a twinkle in his eyes that made Taylor's cheeks turn redder—was Bud Hemmingway.

"I'm beggin' your pardon," said the puncher; "but I've come to tell you that Neil Norton is here—again. He's been settin' on the porch for an hour or two—he says. But I think he's stretching it. Anyway, he's tired of waitin' for you—he says—an' he's been wonderin' if you was goin' to set on that boulder all day!"

Taylor slipped off the rock and started toward Bud, feigning resentment.

Bud, his face agitated by a broad grin, deliberately winked at Miss Harlan—though he spoke to Taylor.

"I'd be a little careful about how I went to jumpin' off boulders—you might bust your ankle again!"

And then Taylor grinned at Miss Harlan—who pretended a severity she did not feel; while Bud, cackling mirthfully, went toward the ranchhouse.

CHAPTER XXIV

A DEATH WARRANT

CARRINGTON was not a coward; he was not even a cautious man. And the bitter malice that filled his heart, together with riotous impulses that seethed in his brain prompted him to go straight to the Arrow, wreak vengeance upon Taylor and drag Marion Harlan back to the big house he had bought for her.

But a certain memory of Taylor's face when the latter had been pursuing him through the big house; a knowledge of Taylor's ability to inflict punishment, together with a divination that Taylor would not hesitate to kill him should there arise the slightest opportunity—all these considerations served to deter Carrington from undertaking any rash action.

Taylor's opposition to his desires enraged Carrington. He had met and conquered many men—and he had coolly and deliberately robbed many others, himself standing secure and immune behind legal barriers. And he had seen his victims writhe and squirm and struggle in the meshes he had prepared for them. He had heard them rave and wail and threaten; but not one of them had attempted to inflict physical punishment upon him.

Taylor, however, was of the fighting type. On two occasions, now, Carrington had been given convincing proof of the man's ability. And he had seen in Taylor's eyes on the latest occasion the implacable gleam of iron resolution and—when Taylor had gone down, fighting to the last, in the sanguinary battle at the big house, he had not failed to note the indomitability of the man—the tenacious and dogged spirit that knows no defeat—a spirit that would not be denied.

And so, though Carrington's desires would have led him to recklessly carry the fight to the Arrow, certain dragging qualms of reluctance dissuaded him from another meeting with Taylor on equal terms.

And yet the malevolent passions that gripped the big man would not tolerate the thought of opposition. Taylor was the only man who stood between him and his desires, and Taylor must be removed.

During the days of Carrington's confinement to his rooms above the Castle—awaiting the slow healing of the wound Taylor had inflicted upon him, and the many bruises that marred his face—mementoes of the terrible punishment Taylor had inflicted upon him—the big man nursed his venomous thoughts and laid plans for revenge upon his enemy.

As soon as he was able to appear in Dawes—to undergo without humiliation the inspection of his face by the citizens of the town—for news of his punishment

had been whispered broadcast — he boarded a westbound train.

He got off at Nogel, a little mining town sitting at the base of some foothills in the Sangre de Christo Range, some miles from Dawes.

He spent three days in Nogel, interrogating the resident manager of the "Larry's Luck" mine, talking with miners and storekeepers and quizzing men in saloons — and at the beginning of the fourth day he returned to Dawes.

At about the time Miss Harlan and Taylor were sitting on the rock on the bank of the river near the Arrow, Carrington was in the courthouse at Dawes, leaning over Judge Littlefield's desk. A tall, sleek-looking man of middle age, with a cold, steady eye and a smooth smile, stood near Carrington. The man was neatly attired, and looked like a prosperous mine-owner or operator.

But had the judge looked sharply at his hands when he gripped the one that was held out to him when Carrington introduced the man; or had he been a physiognomist of average ability, he could not have failed to note the smooth softness of the man's hands and the gleam of guile and cunning swimming deep in his eyes.

But the judge noted none of those things. He had caught the man's name — Mint Morton — and instantly afterward all his senses became centered upon what the man was saying.

For the man spoke of conscience—and the judge had one of his own—a guilty one. So he listened attentively while the man talked.

The thing had been bothering the man for some months—or from the time it happened, he said. And he had come to make a confession.

He was a miner, having a claim near Nogel. He knew Quinton Taylor, and he had known Larry Harlan. One morning after leaving his mine on a trip to Nogel for supplies, he had passed close to the “Larry’s Luck” mine. Being on good terms with the partners, he had thought of visiting them. Approaching the mine on foot—having left his horse at a little distance—he heard Taylor and Harlan quarreling. He had no opportunity to interfere, for just as he came upon the men he saw Taylor knock Harlan down with a blow of his fist. And while Harlan lay unconscious on the ground Taylor had struck him on the head with a rock.

Morton had not revealed himself, then, fearing Taylor would attack him. He had concealed himself, and had seen Taylor, apparently remorseful, trying to revive Harlan. These efforts proving futile, Taylor had rigged up a drag, placed Harlan on it, and had taken him to Nogel. But Harlan died on the way.

To Littlefield’s inquiry as to why Morton had not reported the murder instantly, the man replied that, being a friend to Taylor, he had been reluctant to expose him.

After the man concluded his story the judge and Carrington exchanged glances. There was a vindictively triumphant gleam in Littlefield's eyes, for he still remembered the humiliation he had endured at Taylor's hands.

He took Morton's deposition, told him he would send for him, later; and dismissed him. Carrington, appearing to be much astonished over the man's confession, accompanied him to the station, where he watched him board the train that would take him back to Nogel.

And on the platform of one of the coaches, Carrington, grinning wickedly, gave the man a number of yellow-backed treasury notes.

"You think I won't have to come back—to testify against him?" asked the man, smiling coldly.

"Certainly not!" declared Carrington. "You've signed his death warrant this time!"

Carrington watched the train glide westward, and then returned to the courthouse. He found the judge sitting at his desk, gazing meditatively at the floor. For there had been something insincere in Morton's manner—his story of the murder had not been quite convincing—and in spite of his resentment against Taylor the judge did not desire to add anything to the burden already carried by his conscience.

Carrington grinned maliciously as he halted at Littlefield's side and laid a hand on the other's arm.

"We've got him, Littlefield!" he said. "Get busy.

Issue a warrant for his arrest. I'll have Danforth send you some men to serve as deputies — twenty of them, if you think it necessary!"

The judge cleared his throat and looked with shifting eyes at the other.

"Look here, Carrington," he said, "I—I have some doubts about the sincerity of that man Morton. I'd like to postpone action in this case until I can make an investigation. It seems to me that—that Taylor, for all his—er—seeming viciousness, is not the kind of man to kill his partner. I'd like to delay just a little, to——"

"And let Taylor get wind of the thing—and escape. Not by a damned sight! One man's word is as good as another's in this country; and it's your duty as a judge of the court, here, to act upon any complaint. You issue the warrant. I'll get Keats to serve it. He'll bring Taylor here, and you can legally examine him. That's merely justice!"

Half an hour later, Carrington was handing the warrant to a big, rough-looking man with an habitual and cruel droop to the corners of his mouth.

"You'd better take some men with you, Keats," suggested Carrington. "He'll fight, most likely," he grinned, evilly. "Understand," he added; "if you should have to kill Taylor bringing him in, there would be no inquiry made. And——" he looked at Keats and grinned, slowly and deliberately closing an eye.

CHAPTER XXV

KEATS LOOKS FOR "SQUINT"

NEIL NORTON had been attending to Taylor's affairs in Dawes during the latter's illness, and he had ridden to the Arrow this morning to discuss with Taylor a letter he had received — for Taylor — from a Denver cattle buyer. The inquiry was for Herefords of certain markings and quality, and Norton could give the buyer no information. So Norton had come to Taylor for the information.

"The herd is grazing in the Kelso Basin," Taylor told Norton. Norton knew the Kelso Basin was at least fifteen miles distant from the Arrow ranchhouse — a deep, wide valley directly west, watered by the same river that flowed near the Arrow ranchhouse.

"I can't say, offhand, whether we've got what your Denver man wants." He grinned at Norton, adding: "But it's a fine morning for a ride, and I haven't done much riding lately. I'll go and take a look."

"I'll be looking, too," declared Norton. "The *Eagle* forms are ready for the press, and there isn't much to do."

Later, Taylor, mounted on Spotted Tail, and Norton on a big, rangy sorrel, the two men rode away. Taylor

stopped at the horse corral gate long enough to tell Bud Hemmingway, who was replacing a bar, that he and Norton were riding to the Kelso Basin.

And there was one other to whom he had spoken—when he had gone into the house to buckle on his cartridge-belt and pistols, just before he went out to saddle Spotted Tail. It was the girl who had tantalized him while they had been sitting on the rock. She had not spoken frivolously to him inside the house; instead, she had gravely warned him to be "careful;" that his wounds might bother him on a long ride—and that she didn't want him to suffer a relapse. And she watched him as he and Norton rode away, following the dust-cloud that enveloped them until it vanished into the mists of distance. Then she turned from the door with a sigh, thinking of the fate that had made her dependent upon the charity of the man she loved.

To Bud Hemmingway, working at the corral gate about an hour following the departure of Taylor and Norton, there came an insistent demand to look toward Dawes. It was merely one of those absurd impulses founded upon a whim provoked by self-manufactured presentiment—but Bud looked. What he saw caused him to stand erect and stare hard at the trail between Mullarky's cabin and the Arrow—for about two miles out came a dozen or more riders, their horses traveling fast.

For several seconds Bud watched intently, straining his

eyes in an effort to distinguish something about the men that would make their identity clear. And then he dropped the hammer he had been working with and ran to the bunkhouse, where he put on his cartridge-belt and pistol.

Returning to the bunkhouse door, he stood in it for a time, watching the approaching men. Then he scowled, muttering:

"It's that damned Keats an' some of his bunch! What in hell are they wantin' at the Arrow?"

Bud was standing near the edge of the front gallery when Keats and his men rode up. There were fourteen of the men, and, like their leader, they were ill-visaged, bepistoled.

Marion Harlan had heard the noise of their approach, and she had come to the front door. She stood in the opening, her gaze fixed inquiringly upon the riders, though chiefly upon Keats, whose manner proclaimed him the leader. He looked at Bud.

"Hello, Hemmingway!" he greeted, gruffly. "I take it the outfit ain't in?"

"Workin', Kelso," returned Bud. Bud's gaze at Keats was belligerent; he resented the presence of Keats and the men at the Arrow, for he had never liked Keats, and he knew the relations between the visitor and Taylor were strained almost to the point of open antagonism.

"What's eatin' you guys?" demanded Bud.

"Plenty!" stated Keats importantly. He turned to the men.

"Scatter!" he commanded; "an' rustle him up, if he's anywhere around! Hey!" he shouted at a slender, rat-faced individual. "You an' Darbey search the house! Two more of you take a look at the bunkhouse—and the rest of you nose around the other buildin's. Keep your eyes peeled, an' if he goes to gettin' fresh, plug him plenty!"

"Why, what is wrong?" demanded Marion. Her face was pale with indignation, for she resented the authoritative tone used by Keats as much as she resented the thought of the two men entering the house unbidden.

Keats's face flamed with sudden passion. With a snap of his wrist he drew his gun and trained its muzzle on Bud.

"Wrong enough!" he snapped. He was looking at Bud while answering Miss Harlan's question. "I'm after Squint Taylor, an' I'm goin' to get him—that's all! An' if you folks go to interferin' it'll be the worse for you!"

Marion stiffened and braced herself in the doorway, her eyes wide with dread and her lips parted to ask the question that Bud now spoke, his voice drawling slightly with sarcasm.

"Taylor, eh?" he said. "What you wantin' with Taylor?"

"I'm wantin' him for murderin' Larry Harlan!" snapped Keats.

Bud gulped, drew a deep breath and went pale. He looked at Marion, and saw that the girl was terribly moved by Keats's words. But neither the girl nor Bud spoke while Keats dismounted, crossed the porch, and stopped in front of the door, which was barred by the girl's body.

"Get out of the way—I'm goin' in!" ordered Keats.

The girl moved aside to let him pass, and as he crossed the threshold she asked, weakly:

"How do you—how do they know Mr. Taylor killed Larry Harlan?"

Keats turned on her, grinning mirthlessly.

"How do we know anything?" he jeered. "Evidence—that's what—an' plenty of it!"

Keats vanished inside, and Bud, his eyes snapping with the alert glances he threw around him, slowly backed away from the porch toward the stable. As he turned, after backing several feet, he saw Marion walk slowly to a rocker that stood on the porch, drop weakly into it and cover her face with her hands.

Gaining the stable, Bud worked fast; throwing a saddle and bridle upon King, the speediest horse in the Arrow outfit, excepting Spotted Tail.

With movements that he tried hard to make casual, but with an impatience that made his heart pound heav-

ily, he got King out and led him to the rear of the stable.

Some of Keats's men were running from one building to another; but he was not Taylor, and they seemed to pay no attention to him, beyond giving him sharp glances.

Passing behind the blacksmith-shop, Bud heard a voice saying:

"Dead or alive, Keats says; an' they'd admire to have him dead. I heard Carrington tellin' Keats!"

As the sound of the voice died away, Bud touched King's flank with the spurs. The big horse, after a day in the stable, was impatient and eager for a run, and he swept past the scattered buildings of the ranch with long, swift leaps that took him out upon the plains before Keats could complete his search of the first floor of the house.

The two men who had searched the upper floor came downstairs, to meet Keats in the front room. They grimly shook their heads at Keats, and at his orders went outside to search with the other men.

Keats stepped to the door, saw Marion sitting limply in the rocking-chair, her shoulders convulsed with sobs, and crossed to her, shaking her with a brutal arm.

"Where's that guy I left standin' there? Where's he — Hemmingway?"

"I don't know," said the girl dully.

Keats cursed and ran to the edge of the porch. With

his gaze sweeping the buildings, the pasture, the corrals, and the wide stretch of plain westward, he stiffened, calling angrily to his men :

“There he goes—damn him! It’s that sneakin’ Bud Hemmingway, an’ he’s gone to tell Taylor we’re after him! He knows where Taylor is! Get your hosses!”

Forced to her feet by the intense activity that followed Keats’s loudly bellowed orders, the girl crossed the porch, and from a point near the end railing watched Keats and his men clamber into their saddles and race after Bud. For a long time she watched them—a tiny blot gliding over the plains, followed by a larger blot—and then she walked slowly to the rocking-chair, looked down at it as though its spaciousness invited her; then she turned from it, entered the house, and going to her room—where Martha was sleeping—began feverishly throwing her few belongings into the small handbag she had brought with her from the big house.

CHAPTER XXVI

KEATS FINDS "SQUINT"

LOOKING back after he had been riding for some minutes, Bud saw a dozen or more horses break from the group of Arrow buildings and come racing toward him, spreading out fanwise.

"They've seen me!" breathed Bud, and he leaned over King's shoulders and spoke to him. The animal responded with a burst of speed that brought a smile to Bud's face. For the puncher knew that Taylor and Norton couldn't have traveled more than a few miles in the short time that had passed since their departure; and he knew also that in a short run—of a dozen miles or so—there wasn't a horse in the Dawes section that could catch King, barring, of course, Spotted Tail, the real king of range horses.

And so Bud bent eagerly to his work, not riding erect in the saddle as is the fashion of the experienced cow-puncher in an unfamiliar country, where pitfalls, breaks, draws, hidden gullies, and weed-grown barrancas provide hazards that might bring disaster. Bud knew this section of the country as well as he knew the interior of the bunkhouse, and with his knowledge came a confidence

that nothing would happen to him or King, except possibly a slip into a gopher hole.

And Bud kept scanning the country far enough ahead to keep King from running into a gopher town. He swung the animal wide in passing them—for he knew it was the habit of these denizens of the plains to extend their habitat—some venturesome and independent spirits straying far from the huddle and congestion of the multitude.

Bud looked back many times during the first two miles, and he saw that Keats and his men were losing ground; their horses could not keep the pace set by the big bay flier under Bud.

And King was not going as he could go when the necessity arrived. This ride was a frolic for the big bay, and yet Bud knew he must not force him, that he must conserve his wind, for if Taylor and Norton had yielded to a whim to hurry, even King would need all his speed and endurance to hang on. For the sorrel that had accompanied Spotted Tail was not so greatly inferior to King that the latter could take liberties with him.

Bud gloated as he looked back after he had covered another mile. Keats and his men were still losing ground, though they were not so very far back, either—Bud could almost see the faces of the men. But that, Bud knew, was due to the marvelous clarity of the atmosphere.

When the sides of the big hills surrounding the level

began to sweep inward rapidly, Bud knew that the grass level was coming to an end, and that presently he would strike a long stretch of broken country. Beyond that was a big valley, rich and fertile, in which, according to report, the Arrow herd should be grazing, guarded by the men of the outfit, under Bothwell. But Kelso Basin was still nine or ten miles distant, and Bud did not yet dare to let the big bay horse run his best.

Still, when they flashed by a huge promontory that stood sentinel-like above the waters of the river—a spot well remembered by Bud, because many times while on day duty he had lain prone on its top smoking and dreaming—King was running as lightly as a leaf before the hurricane.

King had entered the section of broken country, with its beds of rock and lava, and huge boulders strewn here and there, relics of gigantic upheavals when the earth was young; and Bud was skilfully directing King to the stretches of smooth level that he found here and there, when far ahead he saw Taylor and Norton.

In ten minutes he was within hailing distance, and he grinned widely when, hearing him, they pulled their horses to a halt and, wheeling, faced him.

For Bud saw that they had reached a spot which would make an admirable defensive position, should Taylor decide to resist Keats. The hills, in their gradual inward sweep, were close together, so that their crests seemed to

nod to one another. And a little farther down, Bud knew, they formed a gorge, which still farther on merged into a cañon. It was an ideal position for a stand—if Taylor would stand and not run for it; and he rather thought Taylor would not run.

Taylor had ridden toward Bud, and was a hundred feet in advance of Norton when Bud pulled King to a halt, shouting:

“Keats and a dozen men are right behind me—a mile; mebbe two! He’s got a warrant for you, chargin’ you with murderin’ Larry Harlan! I heard one of his scum sayin’ it was to be a clean-up!”

Taylor laughed; he did not seem to be at all interested in Keats or his men, who at that instant were riding at a pace that was likely to kill their horses, should they be forced to maintain it.

“Who accused me of murdering Harlan?”

“Keats didn’t say. But I heard a guy sayin’ that Carington was wantin’ Keats to take you dead!”

The cold gleam in Taylor’s eyes and the slight, stiff grin that wreathed his lips, indicated that he had determined that Keats would have to kill him before taking him.

“A dozen of them, eh?” he said, looking from Bud to Norton deliberately. “Well, that’s a bunch for three men to fight, but it isn’t enough to run from. We’ll stay here and have it out with them. That is,” he added with

a quick, quizzical look at the two men, "if one of you is determined to stay."

"One of us?" flared Bud. He gazed hard at Norton, with suspicion and belligerence in his glance. Norton flushed at the look. "I reckon we'll both be in at the finish," added Bud.

"Only one," declared Taylor. "We might hold a dozen men off here for a good many hours. But if they were wise and patient they'd get us. One man will light out for Kelso Basin to get the outfit. Settle it between you, but be quick about it!"

Taylor swung down from his horse, led the animal out of sight behind a jutting crag into a sort of pocket in the side of the gorge, where there would be no danger of the magnificent beast being struck by a bullet. Taylor pulled his rifle from its saddle-sheath, examined the mechanism, looked at his pistols, and then returned to where Bud Hemmingway and Neil Norton sat on their horses.

Bud's face was flushed and Norton was grinning. And at just the instant Taylor came in sight of them Norton was saying:

"Well, if you insist, I suppose I shall have to go to Kelso. There isn't time to argue."

Norton wheeled his horse, and, with a quick grin at Taylor, sent the animal clattering down the gorge.

Bud's grin at Taylor was pregnant with guilt.

"Norton didn't want me to stay. There's lots of stubborn cusses in the world—now, ain't they?"

Taylor's answering smile showed that he understood.

"Get King back here with Spotted Tail, Bud!" he directed. "And take that pile of rocks for cover. They're coming!"

By the time Bud did as he had been bidden, and was crouching behind a huge mound of broken rock on the north side of the gorge, Taylor on the southern side, with a twenty-foot passage on the comparatively level floor of the gorge between them, and an uninterrupted sweep of narrow level in front of them, except for here and there a jutting rock or a boulder, they saw Keats and his men just entering the stretch of broken country.

The horses of the pursuing outfit were doing their best. They came on over the stretch of treacherous trail, laboring, pounding and clattering; singly sometimes, two and three abreast where there was room, keeping well together, their riders urging them with quirt and spur. For far back on the trail they had lost sight of Bud, though Keats had remembered that Bud had said Taylor had gone to Kelso Basin, and therefore Keats knew he was on the right trail.

However, he did not want to let Bud get to Kelso before him to warn the Arrow outfit; for that would mean a desperate battle with a force equal in numbers to his own. Keats fought best when the advantages were with him,

and he knew his men were similarly constituted. And so he was riding as hard as he dared, hoping that something would happen to Bud's horse—that the animal might become winded or fall. A man could not tell what *might* happen in a pursuit of this character.

But the thing that *did* happen had not figured in Keats's lurid conjectures at all. That was why, when he heard Taylor's quick challenge, he pulled his horse up sharply, so that the animal slipped several feet and came to a halt sidewise.

Keats's unexpected halt brought confusion to his followers. A dozen of them, crowding Keats hard, and not noticing their leader's halt in time, rode straight against him, their horses jamming the narrow gorge, kicking, snorting and squealing in a disordered and uncontrollable mass.

When the tangle had been magically undone—the magic being Taylor's voice again, burdened with sarcasm bearing upon their excitement—Keats found himself nearest the nest of rocks from behind which Taylor's voice seemed to come.

The jutting crag behind which Taylor had concealed his horse, and where Bud had led King, completely obstructed Keats's view of the gorge behind the crag, toward Kelso Basin, and Keats did not know but that the entire Arrow outfit was concealed behind the rocks and boulders that littered the level in the vicinity.

And so he sat motionless, slowly and respectfully raising his hands. Noting his action, his men did likewise.

"That's polite," came Taylor's voice coldly. "Hemingway says you're looking for me. What for?"

"I've got a warrant for you, chargin' you with murderin' Larry Harlan."

"Who accused me?"

"Mint Morton, of Nogel."

There was a long silence. Behind the clump of rock Taylor smiled mirthlessly at Bud, who was watching him. For Taylor knew Mint Morton, of Nogel, as a gambler, unscrupulous and dishonest. He had earned Morton's hatred when one night in a Nogel saloon he had caught Morton cheating and had forced him to disgorge his winnings. His victim had been a miner on his way East with the earnings of five years in his pockets. Taylor had not been able to endure the spectacle of abject despair that had followed the man's loss of all his money.

Taylor did not know that Carrington had hunted Morton up, paying him well to bring the murder charge, but Taylor did know that he was innocent of murder; and by linking Morton with Carrington he could readily understand why Keats wanted him. He broke the silence with a short:

"Who issued the warrant?"

"Judge Littlefield."

"Well," said Taylor, "you can take it right back to

him and tell him to let Carrington serve it. For," he added, a note of grim humor creeping into his voice, "I'm a heap particular about such things, Keats. I couldn't let a sneak like you take me in. And I don't like the looks of that dirty-looking outfit with you. And so I'm telling you a few things. I'm giving you one minute to hit the breeze out of this section. If you're here when that time is up, I down *you*, Keats! Slope!"

Keats flashed one glance around at his men. Some of them already had their horses in motion; others were nervously fingering their bridle-reins. Keats sneered at the rock nest ahead of him.

The intense silence which followed Taylor's warning lasted about ten seconds. Then Keats's face paled; he wheeled his horse and sent it scampering over the back trail, his men following, crowding him hard.

CHAPTER XXVII

BESIEGED

HEMMINGWAY tentatively suggested that a ride through the gorge toward the Kelso Basin might simplify matters for himself and Taylor; it might, he said, even seem to make the defending of their position unnecessary. But his suggestions met with no enthusiasm from Taylor, who lounged among the rocks of his place of concealment calmly smoking.

Taylor gave some reasons for his disinclination to adopt Hemmingway's suggestions.

"Norton will be back in an hour, with Bothwell and the outfit." And now he grinned as he looked at Bud. "Miss Harlan told me to be careful about my scratches. I take it she don't want no more sieges with a sick man. And I'm taking her advice. If I'd go to riding my horse like blazes, maybe I *would* get sick again. And she wouldn't take care of me anymore. And I'd hate like blazes to run from Keats and his bunch of plug-uglies!"

So Hemmingway said no more on that subject.

They smoked and talked and watched the trail for signs of Keats and his men; while the sun, which had been behind the towering hills surrounding the gorge, trav-

eled slowly above them, finally blazing down from a point directly overhead.

It became hot in the gorge; the air was stifling and the heat uncomfortable. Taylor did not seem to mind it, but Bud, with a vigorous appetite, and longings that ran to flapjacks and sirup, grew impatient.

"If a man could eat now," he remarked once, while the sun was directly overhead, "why, it wouldn't be so bad!"

And then, after the sun's blazing rays had begun to diminish in intensity somewhat, Bud looked upward and saw that the shimmering orb had passed beyond the crest of a towering hill. He looked sharply at Taylor, who was intently watching the back trail, and said gravely:

"Norton ought to have been back with Bothwell and the bunch, now."

"He's an hour overdue," said Taylor, without looking at Bud.

"I reckon somethin's happened," growled Bud. "Somethin' always happens when a guy's holed up, like this. It wouldn't be so bad if a man could eat a little somethin'—to sort of keep him from thinkin' of it all the time. Or, mebbe, if there was a little excitement—or somethin'. A man could ——"

"There'll be plenty of excitement before long," interrupted Taylor. "Keats and his gang didn't go very far. I just saw one of them sneaking along that rock-knob,

down the gorge a piece. They're going to stalk us. If you're thinking of riding to Kelso — why —" He grinned at Bud's resentful scowl.

Lying flat on his stomach, he watched the rock-knob he had mentioned.

"Slick as an Indian," he remarked once, while Bud, having ceased his discontented mutterings, kept his gaze on the rock also.

And then suddenly the eery silence of the gorge was broken by the sharp crack of Taylor's rifle, and, simultaneously, by a shriek of pain. Report and shriek reverberated with weird, echoing cadences between the hills, growing less distinct always and finally the eery silence reigned again.

"They'll know they can't get careless, now," grinned Taylor, working the ejector of his rifle.

Bud did not reply; and for another hour both men intently scanned the hills within range of their vision, straining their eyes to detect signs of movement that would warn them of the whereabouts of Keats and his men.

Anxiously Bud watched the rays of the sun creeping up a precipitous rock wall at a little distance. Slowly the streak of light narrowed, growing always less brilliant, and finally, when it vanished, Bud spoke:

"It's comin' on night, Squint. Somethin's sure happened to Norton." He wriggled impatiently, adding:

"If we're here when night comes we'll have a picnic keepin' them guys off of us."

Taylor said nothing until the gorge began to darken with the shadows of twilight. Then he looked at Bud, his face grim.

"My stubbornness," he said shortly. "I should have taken your advice about going to Kelso Basin — when we had a chance. But I felt certain that Norton would have the outfit here before this. Our chance is gone, now. There are some of Keats's men in the hills, around us. I just saw one jump behind that rim rock on the shoulder of that big hill — there." He indicated the spot. Then he again spoke to Bud.

"There's a chance yet — for you. You take Spotted Tail and make a run for the basin. I'll cover you."

"What about you?" grumbled Bud.

Taylor grinned, and Bud laughed. "You was only funnin' me, I reckon," he said, earnestly. "You knowed I wouldn't slope an' leave you to fight it out alone — now didn't you?"

"But if a man was hungry," said Taylor, "and he knew there was grub with the outfit ——"

"I ain't hungry no more," declared Bud; "I've quit thinkin' of flapjacks for more than ——"

He stiffened, and the first shadows of the night were split by a long, narrow flame-streak as his rifle crashed. And a man who had been slipping into the shelter of a

depression on the side of a hill a hundred yards distant, tumbled grotesquely out and down, and went sliding to the bottom of the gorge.

As though the report of Bud's rifle were a signal, a dozen vivid jets of fire flamed from various points in the surrounding hills, and the silence was rent by the vicious cracking of rifles and the drone and thud of bullets as they sped over the heads of the two men at the bottom of the gorge and flattened themselves against the rocks of their shelter.

That sound, too, died away. And in the heavy, portentous stillness which succeeded it, there came to the ears of the two besieged men the sounds of distant shouting, faint and far.

"It's the outfit!" said Taylor.

And Bud, rolling over and over in an excess of joy over the coming of the Arrow men, hugged an imaginary form and yelled:

"Oh, Bothwell, you old son-of-a-gun! How I love you!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE FUGITIVE

ONE thought dominated Marion Harlan's brain as she packed her belongings into the little handbag in her room at the Arrow — an overpowering, monstrous, hideous conviction that she had accepted charity from the man who was accused of murdering her father! There was no room in her brain for other thoughts or emotions; she was conscious of nothing but the horror of it; of the terrible uncertainty that confronted her — of the dread that Taylor *might* be guilty! She wanted to believe in him — she *did* believe in him, she told herself as she packed the bag; she could not accept the word of Keats as final. And yet she could not stay at the Arrow another minute — she could not endure the uncertainty. She must go away somewhere — anywhere, until the charge were proved, or until she could see Taylor, to look into his eyes, there to see his guilt or innocence.

She felt that the charge could not be true; for Taylor had treated her so fairly; he had been so sympathetically friendly; he had seemed to share her grief over her father's death, and he had seemed so sincere in his declaration of his friendliness toward the man. He had

even seemed to share her grief; and in the hallowed moments during which he had stood beside her while she had looked into her father's room, he might have been secretly laughing at her!

And into her heart as she stood in the room, now, there crept a mighty shame—and the shadow of her mother's misconduct never came so close as it did now. For she, too, had violated the laws of propriety; and what she was receiving was not more than her just due. And yet, though she could blame herself for coming to the Arrow, she could not excuse Taylor's heinous conduct if he were guilty.

And then, the first fierce passion burning itself out, there followed the inevitable reaction—the numbing, staggering, sorrowing realization of loss. This in turn was succeeded by a frenzied desire to go away from the Arrow—from everybody and everything—to some place where none of them would ever see her again.

She started toward the door, and met Parsons—who was looking for her. He darted forward when he saw her, and grasped her by the shoulders.

“What has happened?” he demanded.

She told him, and the man's face whitened.

“I was asleep, and heard nothing of it,” he said. “So that man Keats said they had plenty of evidence! You are going away? I wouldn't, girl; there may have been a mistake. If I were you——”

Her glance of horror brought Parsons' protests to an end quickly. He, too, she thought, was under the spell of Taylor's magnetism. That, or every person she knew was a prey to those vicious and fawning instincts to which she had yielded—the subordination of principle to greed—of ease, or of wealth, or of place.

She shuddered with sudden repugnance.

For the first time she had a doubt of Parsons—a revelation of that character which he had always succeeded in keeping hidden from her. She drew away from him and walked to the door, telling him that *he* might stay, but that she did not intend to remain in the house another minute.

She found a horse in the stable—two, in fact—the ones Taylor had insisted belonged to her and Martha. She threw saddle and bridle on hers, and was mounting, when she saw Martha standing at the stable door, watching her.

“Yo’ uncle says you goin’ away, honey—how’s that? An’ he done say somethin’ about Mr. Squint killin’ your father. Doan’ you b’lieve no fool nonsense like that! Mr. Squint wouldn’t kill nobody’s father! That deputy man ain’t nothin’ but a damn, no-good liar!”

Martha’s vehemence was genuine, but not convincing; and the girl mounted the horse, hanging the handbag from the pommel of the saddle.

“You’s sure goin’!” screamed the negro woman, fran-

tic with a dread that she was in danger of losing the girl for whom she had formed a deep affection.

"You wait—you hear!" she demanded; "if you leave this house I's a goin', too!"

Marion waited until Martha led the other horse out, and then, with the negro woman following, she rode eastward on the Dawes trail, not once looking back.

And not a word did she say to Martha as they rode into the space that stretched to Dawes, for the girl's heart was heavy with self-accusation.

They stopped for an instant at Mullarky's cabin, and Mrs. Mullarky drew from the girl the story of the morning's happenings. And like Martha, Mrs. Mullarky had an abiding faith in Taylor's innocence. More—she scorned the charge of murder against him.

"Squint Taylor murder your father, child! Why, Squint Taylor thought more of Larry Harlan than he does of his right hand. An' you ain't goin' to run away from him—for the very good reason that I ain't goin' to let you! You're upset—that's what—an' you can't think as straight as you ought to. You come right in here an' sip a cup of tea, an' take a rest. I'll put your horses away. If you don't want to stay at the Arrow while Taylor, the judge, an' all the rest of them are pullin' the packin' out of that case, why, you can stay right here!"

Yielding to the insistent demands of the good woman, Marion meekly consented and went inside. And Mrs.

Mullarky tried to make her comfortable, and attempted to soothe her and assure her of Taylor's innocence.

But the girl was not convinced; and late in the afternoon, despite Mrs. Mullarky's protests, she again mounted her horse and, followed by Martha, set out toward Dawes, intending to take the first east-bound train out of the town, to ride as far as the meager amount of money in her purse would take her. And as she rode, the sun went down behind the big hill on whose crest sat the big house, looming down upon the level from its lofty eminence; and the twilight came, bathing the world with its somber promise of greater darkness to follow. But the darkness that was coming over the world could not be greater than that which reigned in the girl's heart.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CAPTIVE

CARRINGTON'S experiences with Taylor had not dulled the man's savage impulses, nor had they cooled his feverish desire for the possession of Marion Harlan. In his brain rioted the dark, unbridled passions of those progenitors he had claimed in his talk with Parsons on the morning he had throttled the little man in his rooms above the Castle.

For the moment he had postponed the real beginning of his campaign for the possession of Dawes, his venomous hatred for Taylor and his passion for the girl overwhelming his greed.

He had watched the departure of Keats and his men, a flush of exultation on his face, his eyes alight with fires that reflected the malignant hatred he felt. And when Keats and the others disappeared down the trail that led to the Arrow, Carrington spent some time in Dawes. Shortly after noon he rode out the river trail toward the big house with two men that he had engaged to set the interior in order.

Carrington had not seen the house since the fight with Taylor in the front room, and the wreck and ruin that

met his gaze as he stood in the door brought a sullen pout to his lips.

But he intended to exact heavy punishment for what had occurred at the big house; and as he watched the men setting things to order—mending the doors and repairing the broken furniture—he drew mental pictures that made his eyes flash with pleasure.

He felt that by this time Keats and his men should have settled with Taylor. After that, he, himself, would make the girl pay.

So he was having the house put in order, that it would again be habitable; and then, when that was done, and Taylor out of the way, he would go to the Arrow after the girl. But before he went to the Arrow he would await the return of Keats with the news that Taylor would no longer be able to thwart him.

Never in his life had he met a man he feared as he feared Taylor. There was something about Taylor that made Carrington's soul shrivel. He knew what it was—it was his conviction of Taylor's absolute honorableness, as arrayed against his own beastly impulses. But that knowledge merely served to intensify his hatred for Taylor.

Toward evening Carrington rode back to Dawes with the men; and while there he sought news from Keats. Danforth, from whom he inquired, could tell him nothing, and so Carrington knew that Taylor had not yet been

disposed of. But Carrington knew the time would not be long now; and in a resort of a questionable character he found two men who listened eagerly to his proposals. Later, the two men accompanying him, he again rode to the big house.

And just as dusk began to settle over the big level at the foot of the long slope—and while the last glowing light from the day still softly bathed the big house, throwing it into bold relief on the crest of its flat-topped hill, Carrington was standing on the front porch, impatiently scanning the basin for signs of Keats and his men.

For a time he could distinguish little in the basin, for the mists of twilight were heavy down there. And then a moving object far out in the basin caught his gaze, and he leaned forward, peering intently, consumed with eagerness and curiosity.

A few minutes later, still staring into the basin, Carrington became aware that there were two moving objects. They were headed toward Dawes, and proceeding slowly; and at last, when they came nearer and he saw they were two women, on horses, he stiffened and shaded his eyes with his hands. And then he exclaimed sharply, and his eyes glowed with triumph—for he had recognized the women as Marion Harland and Martha.

Moving slowly, so that he might not attract the atten-

tion of the women, should they happen to be looking toward the big house, he went inside and spoke shortly to the two men he had brought with him.

An instant later the three, Carrington leading, rode into the timber surrounding the house, filed silently through it, and with their horses in a slow trot, sank down the long slope that led into the big basin.

For a time they were not visible, as they worked their way through the chaparral on a little level near the bottom of the slope; and then they came into view again in some tall saccaton grass that grew as high as the backs of their horses.

They might have been swimminig in that much water, for all the sound they made as they headed through the grass toward the Dawes trail, for they made no sound, and only their heads and the heads of their horses appeared above the swaying grass.

But they were seen. Martha, riding at a little distance behind Marion, and straining her eyes to watch the trail ahead, noted the movement in the saccaton, and called sharply to the girl:

"They's somethin' movin' in that grass off to your right, honey! It wouldn't be no cattle, heah; they's never no cattle round heah, fo' they ain't no water. Lawsy!" she exclaimed, as she got a clear view of them; "it's men!"

Marion halted her horse. Martha's voice had startled

her, for she had not been thinking of the present; her thoughts had been centered on Taylor.

A shiver of trepidation ran over her, though, when she saw the men, and she gathered the reins tightly in her hands, ready to wheel the animal under her should the appearance of the men indicate the imminence of danger.

And when she saw that danger did indeed threaten, she spoke to the horse and turned it toward the back trail. For she had recognized one of the three men as Carrington.

But the horse had not taken a dozen leaps before Carrington was beside her, his hand at her bridle. And as her horse came to a halt, Carrington's animal lunged against it, bringing the two riders close together. Carrington leaned over, his face close to hers; she could feel his breath in her face as he laughed jeeringly, his voice vibrating with passion:

"So it *is* you, eh? I thought for a moment that I had made a mistake!" Holding to her horse's bridle-rein with a steady pull that kept the horses close together, he spoke sharply to the two men who had halted near Martha: "Get the nigger! I'll take care of this one!"

And instantly, with a brutal, ruthless strength and energy that took the girl completely by surprise, Carrington threw a swift arm out, grasped her by the waist, drew her out of the saddle, and swung her into his own, cross-wise, so that she lay face up, looking at him.

She fought him then, silently, ferociously, though futilely. For he caught her hands, using both his own, pinning hers so that she could not use them, meanwhile laughing lowly at her efforts to escape.

Even in the dusk she could see the smiling, savage exultation in his eyes; the gloating, vindictive triumph, and her soul revolted at the horror in store for her, and the knowledge nerved her to another mighty effort. Tearing her hands free, she fought him again, scratching his face, striking him with all her force with her fists; squirming and twisting, even biting one of his hands when it came close to her lips as he essayed to grasp her throat, his eyes gleaming with ruthless malignance.

But her efforts availed little. In the end her arms were pinned again to her sides, and he pulled a rope from his saddle-horn and bound them. Then, as she lay back and glared at him, muttering imprecations that brought a mocking smile to his lips, he urged his horse forward, and sent it clattering up the slope, the two men following with Martha.

CHAPTER XXX

PARSONS HAS HUMAN INSTINCTS

ELAM PARSONS stood on the front porch of the Arrow ranchhouse for a long time after Marion and Martha departed, watching them as they slowly negotiated the narrow trail that led toward Dawes. Something of the man's guilt assailed his consciousness as he stood there—a conception of the miserable part he had played in the girl's life.

No doubt had not Fate and Carrington played a mean trick on Parsons, in robbing him of his money and his prospects, the man would not have entertained the thoughts he entertained at this moment; for success would have made a reckoning with conscience a remote possibility, dim and far.

And perhaps it was not conscience that was now troubling Parsons; at least Parsons did not lay the burden of his present thoughts upon so intangible a chimera. Parsons was too much of a materialist to admit he had a conscience.

But a twinge of something seized Parsons as he watched the girl ride away, and bitter thoughts racked his soul. He could not, however, classify his emotions,

and so he stood there on the porch, undecided, vacillating, in the grip of a vague disquiet.

Parsons sat on the porch until long after noon; for, after Marion and Martha had vanished into the haze of distance, Parsons dropped into a chair and let his chin sink to his chest.

He did not get up to prepare food for himself; he did not think of eating, for the big, silent ranchhouse and the gloomy, vacant appearance of the other buildings drew the man's attention to the aching emptiness of his own life. He had sought to gain everything—scheming, planning, plotting dishonestly; taking unfair advantage; robbing people without compunction—and he had gained nothing. Yes—he had gained Carrington's contempt!

The recollection of Carrington's treatment of him fired his passions with a thousand licking, leaping flames. In his gloomy meditations over the departure of the girl, he had almost forgotten Carrington. But he thought of Carrington now; and he sat stiff and rigid in the chair, glowering, his lips in a pout, his soul searing with hatred.

But even the nursing of that passion failed to satisfy Parsons. Something lacked. There was still that conviction of utter baseness—his own baseness—to torture him. And at last, toward evening, he discovered that he longed for the girl. He wanted to be near her; he wanted to do something for her to undo the wrong he had done her; he wanted to make some sort of reparation.

So the man assured himself. But he knew that deep in his inner consciousness lurked the dread knowledge that Taylor was aware of his baseness. For Taylor had overheard the conversation between Carrington and himself on the train, and Parsons feared that should Taylor by any chance escape Keats and his men and return to the Arrow to find Marion gone, he would vent his rage and fury upon the man who had sinned against the woman he loved. That was the emotion which dominated Parsons as he sat on the porch; it was the emotion that made the man fervently desire to make reparation to the girl; it was the emotion that finally moved him out of his chair and upon a horse that he found in the stable, to ride toward Dawes in the hope of finding her.

Parsons, too, stopped at the Mullarky cabin. He discovered that Marion had left there shortly before, after having refused Mrs. Mullarky's proffer of shelter until the charge against Taylor could be disproved.

Parsons listened impatiently to the woman's voluble defense of Taylor, and her condemnation of Keats and all those who were leagued against the Arrow owner. And then Parsons rode on.

Far out in the basin, indistinct in the twilight haze, he saw Marion and Martha riding toward Dawes, and he urged his horse in an effort to come up with them before they reached the bottom of the long, gradual rise that would take them into town.

Parsons had got within half a mile of them when he saw them halt and wait the coming of three horsemen, who advanced toward them from the opposite direction. Parsons did not feel like joining the group, for just at that moment he felt as though he could not bear to have anyone see his face—they might have discovered the guilt in it—and so he waited.

He saw the three men ride close to the other riders; he watched in astonishment while one of the strange riders pursued one of the women, catching her.

Parsons saw it all. But he did not ride forward, for he was in the grip of a mighty terror that robbed him of power to move. For he knew one of the strange riders was Carrington. He would have recognized him among a thousand other men.

Parsons watched the three men climb the big slope that led to the great house on the flat-topped hill. For many minutes after they had reached the crest of the hill Parsons sat motionless on his horse, gazing upward. And when he saw a light flare up in one of the rooms of the big house, he cursed, his face convulsed with impotent rage.

Marion Harlan did not yield to the overpowering weakness that seized her after she realized that further resistance to Carrington would be useless. And instead of yielding to the hysteria that threatened her, she clenched

her hands and bit her lips in an effort to retain her composure. She succeeded. And during the progress of her captor's horse up the long slope she kept a good grip on herself, fortifying herself against what might come when she and her captor reached the big house.

When they reached the crest of the hill, Carrington ordered the two men to take Martha around to the back of the house and confine her in one of the rooms. One man was to guard her. The other was to wait on the front porch until Carrington called him.

The girl had decided to make one more struggle when Carrington dismounted with her, but though she fought hard and bitterly, she did not succeed in escaping Carrington, and the latter finally lifted her in his arms and carried her into the front room, the room in which Carrington had fought with Taylor the day Taylor had killed the three men who had ambushed him.

Carrington lighted a lamp—it was this light Parsons had seen from the basin—placed it on a shelf, and in its light grinned triumphantly at the girl.

“Well, we are here,” he said.

In his voice was that passion that had been in it that other time, when he had pursued her into the house, and she had escaped him by hiding in the attic. She cringed from him, backing away a little, and, noting the movement, he laughed hoarsely.

“Don't worry,” he said, “at least for an hour or two.

I've got something more important on my mind. Do you know what it is?" he demanded, grinning hugely. "It's Taylor!" He suddenly seemed to remember that he did not know why she had been abroad at dusk on the Dawes trail, and he came close to her.

"Did you see Keats today?"

She did not answer, meeting his gaze fairly, her eyes flashing with scorn and contempt. But he knew from the flame in her eyes that she *had* seen Keats, and he laughed derisively.

"So you saw him," he jeered; "and you know that he came for Taylor. Did he find Taylor at the Arrow?"

Again she did not answer, and he went on, suspecting that Taylor had not been at the Arrow, and that Keats had gone to search for him. "No, Keats didn't find him—that's plain enough. I should have enjoyed being there to hear Keats tell you that Taylor had killed your father. You heard that, didn't you? Yes," he added, his grin broadening; "you heard that. So that's why you left the Arrow! Well, I don't blame you for leaving."

He turned toward the door and wheeled again to face her. "You'll enjoy this," he sneered; "you've been so thick with Taylor. Bah!" he added as he saw her face redden at the insult; "I've known where you stood with Taylor ever since I caught you flirting with him on the station platform the day we came to Dawes. That's why you went to the Arrow from here—refusing my

attentions to *give* yourself to the man who killed your father!"

He laughed, and saw her writhe under the sound of it.

"It hurts, eh?" he said venomously; "well, this will hurt, too. Keats went out to get Taylor, but he will never bring Taylor in—alive. He has orders to kill him—understand? That's why I've got more important business than you to attend to for the next few hours. I'm going to Dawes to find out if Keats has returned. And when Keats comes in with the news that Taylor is done for, I'm coming back here for you!"

Calling the man who was waiting on the porch, Carington directed him to watch the girl; and then, with a last grin at her, he went out, mounted his horse, and rode the trail toward Dawes. And as he rode, he laughed maliciously, for he had not told her that the charge against Taylor was a false one, and that, so far as he knew, Taylor was not guilty of murdering her father.

CHAPTER XXXI

A RESCUE

AN EARLY moon stuck a pallid rim over the crest of the big, hill-like plateau as Parsons sat on his horse in the basin, and Parsons watched it rise in its silvery splendor and bathe the world with an effulgent glow. It threw house and timber on the plateau crest in bold relief, a dark silhouette looming against a flood of shimmering light, and Parsons could see the porch he knew so well, and could even distinguish the break in the timber that led to the house, which merged into the trail that stretched to Dawes.

Parsons was still laboring with the devils of indecision and doubt. He knew why Carrington had captured Marion, and he yearned to take the girl from the man—for her own sake, and for the purpose of satisfying his vengeance. But he knew that certain death awaited him up there should he venture to show himself to Carrington. And yet a certain desperate courage stole into Parsons as he watched from the basin, and when, about half an hour after he had seen the flicker of light filter out of one of the windows of the house, he saw a man emerge, mount a horse, and ride away, he drew a deep breath of resolution

and urged his own horse up the slope. For the man who had mounted the horse up there was Carrington — there could be no doubt of that.

Shivering, though still obeying the courageous impulse that had seized him, Parsons continued to ascend the slope. He went half way and then halted, listening. No sound disturbed the solemn stillness that had followed Carrington's departure.

Reassured, though by this time he was sweating coldly, Parsons accomplished the remainder of the intervening space upward. Far back in the timber he brought his horse to a halt, dismounted, and again listened. Hearing nothing that alarmed him, except a loud, angry voice from the rear of the house — a voice which he knew as Martha's — he cautiously made his way to the front porch, tiptoed across it, and peered stealthily into the room out of which the light still shone, its flickering rays stabbing weakly into the outside darkness.

Looking into the room, Parsons could see Marion sitting in a chair. Her hands were bound, and she was leaning back in the chair, her hair disheveled, her face chalk-white, and her eyes filled with a haunting, terrible dread. Near the door, likewise seated on a chair, his back to the big room that adjoined the one in which he sat, was a villainous-looking man who was watching the girl with a leering grin.

The sight brought a murderous passion into Parsons'

heart, nerving him for the deed that instantly suggested itself to him. He crept off the porch again, moving stealthily lest he make the slightest sound that would warn the watcher at the door, and searched at a corner of the porch until he found what he was looking for—a heavy club, a spoke from one of the wheels of a wagon.

Parsons knew about where to find it, for during the days that he had sat on the porch nursing his resentment against Carrington, he had gazed long at the wagon-spoke, wishing that he might have an opportunity to use it on Carrington.

He took it, balancing it, testing its weight. And now a hideous terror seized him, almost paralyzing him. For though Parsons had robbed many men, he had never resorted to violence; and for a time he stood with the club in his hand, unable to move.

He moved at last, though, his face transformed from the strength of the passion that had returned, and he carefully stepped on the porch, crossed it, and stood, leaning forward, peering into the room through the outside door left open by Carrington. The outside door opened from the big room adjoining that in which the watcher sat, and Parsons could see the man, who, with his back toward the door, was still looking at Marion.

Entering the big room, Parsons saw Marion's eyes widen as she looked full at him. He shook his head at

her; her face grew whiter, and she began to talk to the other man.

Only a second or two elapsed then until Parsons struck. The man rolled out of his chair without a sound, and Parsons, leaping over him, trembling, his breath coming in great gasps, ran to Marion and unbound her hands.

Together they flew outside, where they found the girl's horse tethered near a tree, and Parsons' animal standing where he had left it.

Mounting, the girl whispered to Parsons. She was trembling, and her voice broke with a wailing quaver when she spoke:

"Where shall we go, Elam—where? We—I can't go back to the Arrow! Oh, I just can't! And Carrington will be back! Oh! isn't there *any* way to escape him?"

"We'll go to Dawes, girl; that's where we'll go!" declared Parsons, his dread and fear of the big man equaling that of the girl. We'll go to Dawes and tell them there just what kind of a man Carrington is—and what he has tried to do with you tonight! There must be some men in Dawes who will not stand by and see a woman persecuted!"

And as they rode the river trail toward the town, the girl, white and silent, riding a little distance ahead of him, Parsons felt for the first time in his life the tingling thrills that come of an unselfish deed courageously performed.

And the experience filled him with the spirit to do other good and unselfish deeds.

They rode fast for a time, until the girl again spoke of Carrington's announced intention to return shortly. Then they rode more cautiously, and it was well they did. For they had almost reached Dawes when they heard the whipping tread of a horse's hoofs on the trail, coming toward them. They rode well back from the trail, and, concealed by some heavy brush, saw Carrington riding toward the big house. He went past them, vanishing into the shadows of the trees that fringed the trail, and for a long time the girl and Parsons did not move for fear Carrington might have slowed his horse and would hear them. And when they did come out of their concealment and were again on the Dawes trail, they rode fast, with the dread of Carrington's wrath to spur them on.

It *had* been Martha's voice that Parsons had heard when he had been standing in the timber near the front of the house. The negro woman was walking back and forth in the room where her captor had confined her, vigorously berating the man. She was a dusky thundercloud of wrath, who rumbled verbal imprecations with every breath. Her captor—a small man with a coarse voice, a broken nose, and a scraggy, drooping mustache—stood in the doorway looking at her fiercely, with obvious intent to intimidate the indignant Amazon.

At the instant Parsons heard her voice she was confronting the man, her eyes popping with fury.

"You let me out of heah this minute, yo' white trash! Yo' heah! An' doan' you think I's scared of you, 'cause I ain't! If you doan' hop away from that do', I's goin' to mash yo' haid in wif this yere chair! You git away now!"

The man grinned. It was a forced grin, and his face whitened with it, betraying to Martha the fear he felt of her — which she had suspected from the moment he had brought her in and the light from the kitchen lamp shone on his face.

She took a threatening step toward him; a tentative movement, a testing of his courage. And when she saw him retreat from her slightly, she lunged at him, raising the chair she held in her hands.

Possibly the man was reluctant to resort to violence; he may have had a conviction that the detaining of Martha was not at all necessary to the success of Carrington's plan to subjugate the white girl, or he might have been merely afraid of Martha. Whatever his thoughts, the man continued to retreat from the negro woman, and as she pursued him, her courage grew, and the man's vanished in inverse ratio. And as he passed the center of the kitchen, he wheeled and ran out of the door, Martha following him.

Outside, the man ran toward the stable. For an instant

Martha stood looking after him. Then, thinking Carrington was still in the house, and that there was no hope of her frightening him as she had frightened the little man who had stood guard over her, she ran to where her horse stood, clambered into the saddle, and sent the animal down the big slope toward Mullarky's cabin, where she hoped to find Mullarky, to send him to the big house to rescue the girl from Carrington.

CHAPTER XXXII

TAYLOR BECOMES RILED

BY THE time Bud Hemmingway had finished his grotesque expression of the delight that had seized him, and had got to his knees and was grinning widely at Taylor, the horses of the Arrow outfit were running down the neck of the gorge, their hoofs drumming on the hard floor of the bottom, awakening echoes that filled the gorge with an incessant rumbling clatter that might have caused one to think a regiment of cavalry was advancing at a gallop.

Bud turned his gaze up the gorge and saw them.

"Ain't they great!" he yelled at Taylor. The leap in Bud's voice betrayed something of the strained tenseness with which the man had endured his besiegement.

And now that there was an even chance for him, Bud's old humorous and carefree impulses were again ascendant. He got to his feet, grinning, the spirit of battle in his eyes, and threw a shot at a Keats man, far up on a hillside, who had left his concealment and was running upward. At the report of the rifle the man reeled, caught himself, and continued to clamber upward, another bullet from Bud's rifle throwing up a dust spray at his feet.

Other figures were now running; the slopes of the hills in the vicinity were dotted with moving black spots as the Keats men, also hearing the clattering of hoofs, and divining that their advantage was gone, made a concerted break for their horses, which they had hidden in a ravine beyond the hills.

Taylor did not do any shooting. While Bud was standing erect among the pile of rocks which had served as a shelter for him during the afternoon, his rifle growing hot in his hands, and picturesque curses issued from his lips, Taylor walked to Spotted Tail and tightened the saddle cinches. This task did not take him long, but by the time it was finished the Arrow outfit had dispersed the Keats men, who were fleeing toward Dawes in scattered units.

Bothwell, big and grim, rode to where Taylor was standing, his voice booming as he looked sharply at Taylor.

"I reckon we got here just in time, boss!" he said. "They didn't git you or Bud? No?" at Taylor's grin. "Well, we're wipin' them out—that's all! That Keats bunch can't run in no raw deal like that on the Arrow—not while I'm range boss. Law? Bah! Every damned man that runs with Keats would have stretched hemp before this if they'd have been any law in the country! A clean-up, eh—that's what they tryin' to pull off. Well, watch my smoke!"

His voice leaping with passion, Bothwell slapped his horse sharply, and as the animal leaped down the trail toward Dawes, Bothwell shouted to the other men of the outfit, who had halted at a little distance back in the gorge:

"Come a runnin', you yaps! That ornery bunch can't git out of this section without hittin' the basin trail!"

Bothwell and the others fled down the gorge like a devastating whirlwind before Taylor could offer a word of objection.

As a matter of fact, Taylor had paid little attention to Bothwell's threats. He knew that the big range boss was in a bitter rage, and he had been aware of the ill-feeling that had existed for some time between Keats and his friends and the men of the Arrow outfit.

But the deserved punishment of Keats was not the burden his mind carried at this instant. Dominating every other thought in Taylor's brain was the obvious, naked fact that Carrington had struck at him again; that he had struck underhandedly, as usual; and that he would continue to fight with that method until he was victorious or beaten.

And yet Taylor was not so much concerned over the blow that had been aimed at him as he was of its probable effect upon Marion Harlan. For of course the girl had heard of the charge by this time—or she would hear of it. It would be all the same in the end. And at a blow

the girl's faith in him would be destroyed — the faith that he had been nurturing, and upon which he had built his hopes.

To be sure he had Larry Harlan's note to show her, to convince her of his innocence, but he knew that once the poison of suspicion and doubt got into her heart, she could never give him that complete confidence of which he had dreamed. She might, now that Carrington had spread his poison, conclude that he had forged the note, trusting in it to disarm the suspicions of herself and of the world. And if she were to demand why he had not shown her the note before — when she had first come to the Arrow — he could not tell her that he had determined never to show it to her, lest she understand that he knew her mother's sordid history. That secret, he had promised himself, she would never know; nor would she ever know of the vicious significance of that conversation he had overheard between Carrington and Parsons on the train coming to Dawes. He was convinced that if she knew these things she would never be able to look him in the eyes again.

Therefore, knowing the damage Carrington had wrought by bringing the charge of murder against him, Taylor's rage was now definitely centered upon his enemy. The pursuit and punishment of Keats was a matter of secondary consideration in his mind — Bothwell and the men of the outfit would take care of the man. But Taylor could no longer fight off the terrible rage that had seized

him over the knowledge of Carrington's foul methods, and when he mounted Spotted Tail and urged him down the trail toward the Arrow ranchhouse, there was a set to his lips that caused Norton, who had brought his horse to a halt near him, to look sharply at him and draw a quick breath.

Not speaking to Norton, nor to Bud—who had also remained to watch him—Taylor straightened Spotted Tail to the trail and sent him flying toward the Arrow. Taylor looked neither to the right nor left, nor did he speak to Norton and Bud, who rode hard after him. Down the trail at a point where the neck of the gorge broadened and merged into the grass level that stretched, ever widening, to the Arrow, Spotted Tail and his rider flashed past a big cluster of low hills from which came flame-streaks and the sharp, cracking reports of rifles, the yells of men in pain, and the hoarse curses of men in the grip of the fighting rage.

But Taylor might not have heard the sounds. Certainly he could not have seen the flame-streaks, unless he glimpsed them out of the corners of his eyes, for he did not turn his head as he urged Spotted Tail on, speeding him over the great green sweep of grass at a pace that the big horse had never yet been ridden.

Laboring behind him, for they knew that something momentous impended, Norton and Bud tried their best to keep up with the flying beast ahead of them. But the

sorrel ridden by Norton, and even the great, rangy, lion-hearted King, could not hold the pace that Spotted Tail set for them, and they fell slowly back until, when still several miles from the Arrow, horse and rider vanished into the dusk ahead of them.

CHAPTER XXXIII

RETRIBUTION

TWICE descending the long slope leading to the basin, Martha's horse stumbled. The first time the negro woman lifted him to his feet by jerking sharply on the reins, but when he stumbled the second time, Martha was not alert and the horse went to his knees. Unprepared, Martha was jolted out of the saddle and she fell awkwardly, landing on her right shoulder with a force that knocked the breath out of her.

She lay for a short time, gasping, her body racked with pain, and at last, when she succeeded in getting to her feet, the horse had strayed some little distance from her and was quietly browsing the tops of some saccaton.

It was several minutes before Martha caught the animal—several minutes during which she loosed some picturesque and original profanity that caused the experienced range horse to raise his ears inquiringly.

Then, when she caught the horse, she had some trouble getting into the saddle, though she succeeded after a while, groaning, and grunting, and whimpering.

But Martha forgot her pains and misery once she was in the saddle again, and she rode fast, trembling with

eagerness, her sympathies and her concern solely for the white girl who, she supposed, was a prisoner in the hands of the ruthless and unprincipled man that Martha, with her limited vocabulary, had termed many times a "rapscallion."

Martha headed her horse straight for the Mullarky cabin, guided by a faint shaft of light that issued from one of its windows.

When she reached the cabin she found no one there but Mrs. Mullarky. Ben, Mrs. Mullarky told Martha, had gone to Dawes—in fact, he had been in Dawes all day, she supposed, for he had left home early that morning.

Martha gasped out her news, and Mrs. Mullarky's face whitened. While Martha watched her in astonishment, she tore off the gingham apron that adorned her, threw it into a corner, and ran into another room, from which she emerged an instant later carrying a rifle.

The Irishwoman's face was pale and set, and the light of a great wrath gleamed in her eyes. Martha, awed by the woman's belligerent appearance, could only stand and blink at her, her mouth gaping with astonishment.

"You go right on to the Arrow!" she commanded Martha, as she went out of the door; "mebbe you'll find somebody there by this time, an' if you do, send them to the big house. I'm goin' over there right this minute to take that dear little girl away from that big brute!"

She started while Martha was again painfully mount-

ing her horse, and the two women rode away in opposite directions—Martha whimpering with pain, and Mrs. Mullarky silent, grim, with a wild rage gripping her heart.

Taylor, on Spotted Tail, was approaching the Arrow ranchhouse at a speed slightly greater than that into which the big horse had fallen shortly after he had left the gorge. The spirited animal was just warming to his work, and he was doing his best when he flashed past the big cattle corral, going with the noise of rushing wind. In an instant he was at the long stretch of fence which formed the ranchyard side of the horse corral, and in another instant he was sliding to a halt near the edge of the front porch of the ranchhouse itself. There he drew a deep breath and looked inquiringly at his master, while the latter slid off his back, leaped upon the porch, and with a bound crossed the porch floor, knocking chairs helter-skelter as he went.

The house was dark, but Taylor ran through the rooms, calling sharply for Parsons and Marion, but receiving no reply. When he emerged from the house his face, in the light of the moon that had climbed above the horizon some time before, was like that of a man who has just looked upon the dead face of his best friend.

For Taylor was convinced that he had looked upon death in the ranchhouse—upon the death of his hopes. He stood for an instant on the porch, while his passions

raged through him, and then with a laugh of bitter humor he leaped on Spotted Tail.

Half-way to the Mullarky cabin, with the big horse running like the wind, Taylor saw a shape looming out of the darkness ahead of him. He pulled Spotted Tail down, and loosed one of his pistols, and approached the shape warily, his muscles stiff and taut and ready for action.

But it was only Martha who rode up to him. Her fortitude gone, her pains convulsing her, she wailed to Taylor the story of the night's tragic adventure.

"An' Carrington's got missy in the big house!" she concluded. "She fit him powerful hard, but it was no use — that rapscallion too much fo' her!"

She shouted the last words at Taylor, for Spotted Tail had received a jab in the sides with the rowels that hurt him cruelly, and, angered, he ran like a deer with the hungry cry of a wolf-pack in his ears.

Like a black streak they rushed by Mrs. Mullarky, who breathed a fervent, "Oh, thank the Lord, it's Taylor!" and before the good woman could catch her breath again, Spotted Tail and his rider had opened a huge, yawning space between himself and the laboring horse the woman rode.

Riding with all his muscles taut as bowstrings, and a terrible, constricting pressure across his chest — so mighty were the savage passions that rioted within him — Taylor

reached the foot of the long slope that led to the big house, and sent Spotted Tail tearing upward with rapid, desperate leaps.

When Carrington reached the big house soon after he had unknowingly passed Marion Harlan and Parsons on the river trail, he was in a sullen, impatient mood.

For no word concerning Keats's movements had reached Dawes, and Carrington was afflicted with a gloomy presentiment that something had happened to the man—that he had not been able to locate Taylor, or that he *had* found him and Taylor had succeeded in escaping him.

Carrington did not go at once into the house, for captive though she was, and completely within his power, he did not want the girl to see him in his present mood. Lighting a cigar, and chewing it viciously, he walked to the stable. There, standing in the shadow of the building, he came upon the guard Martha had routed. He spoke sharply to the man, asking him why he was not inside guarding the “nigger.”

The man brazenly announced that Martha had escaped him, omitting certain details and substituting others from his imagination.

“If she hadn’t been a woman, now,” added the man in self-extenuation.

Carrington laughed lowly. “We didn’t need *her*, anyway,” he said, and the other laughed with him.

The laugh restored Carrington's good-nature, and he left the man and went into the front room of the house. Had he paused on the porch to listen, or had he glanced toward the big slope that dropped to the basin, he would not have entered the house just then. And he *would* have paused on the porch had it not been that the intensity of his desires drove him to concentrate all his senses upon Marion.

He crossed the porch and entered the room, and then halted, staring downward with startled eyes at the body of the guard huddled on the floor, a thin stream of blood staining the carpet beneath his head.

Cursing, Carrington stepped into the other room—the room in which he had fought with Taylor—the room in which he had left Marion Harlan bound and sitting on a chair. The lamp on the shelf was still burning, and in its light Carrington saw the rope he had used to bind the girl's hands.

A bitter rage seized him as he looked at the rope, and he threw it from him, cursing. In an instant he was outside the house and had leaped upon his horse. He headed the animal toward the long slope leading to the Arrow trail, for he suspected the girl would go straight back there, despite any conviction she might have of Taylor's guilt—for there she would find Parsons, who would give her what comfort he could. Or she might stop at the Mullarky cabin. Certainly she would not go to Dawes,

for she must know that *he* ruled Dawes — Parsons must have told her that — and that if she went to Dawes, she would be merely postponing her surrender to him.

He had plenty of time, even if she were in Dawes, he meditated as he sent his horse over the crest of the slope, for there were no trains out of the town during the night, and if she were not at the Arrow or Mullarky's, he was sure to catch her later.

He was half-way down the slope, his horse making slow work of threading its way through the gnarled chaparral growth, when, looking downward, he saw another horse leaping up the slope toward him.

In the glare of the moon that was behind Carrington, he could see horse and rider distinctly, and he jerked his own horse to a halt, cursing horribly. For the horse that was leaping toward him like a black demon out of the night was Spotted Tail. And Spotted Tail's rider was Taylor. Carrington could see the man's face, with the terrible passion that distorted it, and Carrington wheeled his horse, making frenzied efforts to escape up the slope.

Carrington was not more than a hundred feet from the big black horse and its indomitable rider when he wheeled his own animal, and he had not traveled more than a few feet when he realized that Spotted Tail was gaining rapidly.

Cursing again, though his face was ghastly with the fear that had seized him, Carrington slipped from his

horse, and, running around so that the animal was between him and Taylor, he drew a heavy pistol from a hip-pocket. And when the oncoming horse and rider were within twenty-five or thirty feet of him, Carrington took deliberate aim and fired.

He grinned vindictively as he saw Taylor reel in the saddle, and he fired again, and saw Taylor drop to the ground beside Spotted Tail.

Carrington could not tell whether his second shot had struck Taylor, and before he could shoot again, Taylor dove headlong toward a jagged rock that thrust a bulging shoulder upward. Carrington threw a snapshot at him as he leaped, but again he could not have told whether the bullet had gone home.

Keeping the horse between himself and the rock behind which Taylor had thrown himself, Carrington leaped behind another that stood near the edge of the chaparral clump through which he had been riding when he had seen Taylor coming up the slope. Seeming to sense their danger, both horses slowly moved off out of the line of fire and proceeded unconcernedly to browse the clumps of grass that dotted the side of the slope.

And now began a long, strained silence. Carrington could see Taylor's rock, but it was at the edge of the chaparral, and Taylor might easily slip into the chaparral and begin a circling movement that would bring him behind Carrington. The thought brought a damp sweat

out upon Carrington's forehead, and he began to cast fearing glances toward the chaparral at his side. He watched it long, and the longer he watched, the greater grew his fear. And at last, at the end of half an hour, the fear grew to a conviction that Taylor *was* stalking him in the chaparral. No longer able to endure the suspense, Carrington left the shelter of his rock and began to work his way around the edge of the chaparral clump.

Taylor had felt the heat and the shock of Carrington's first bullet, and he knew it had gone into his left arm. The second bullet had missed him cleanly, and he landed behind the rock, with all his senses alert, paying no attention to his wound.

He had recognized Carrington, and with the cold calm that comes with implacable determination, Taylor instantly began to take an inventory of the hazards and the advantages of his position. And after his examination was concluded, he dropped to his hands and knees and began to work his way into the chaparral.

He moved cautiously, for he knew that should he disturb the rank growth he would disclose his whereabouts to Carrington, should the latter have gained a vantageous point from where he could watch the thicket for just such signs of Taylor's presence.

But Taylor made no such signs; he had not spent the greater part of his life in the open to be outdone in this

grim strategy by an eastern man. He grinned wickedly at the thought.

He suspected that Carrington might try the very trick he himself was trying, and that thought made him wary.

Working his way into the thicket, he at last reached a point near its center, upon a slight mound surrounded by stunt oak and quivering aspen. There, concealed and alert, he waited for Carrington to show himself.

Carrington, though, did not betray his presence in the thicket. For Carrington was not in the thicket when Taylor reached its center. Carrington had started into the thicket, but he had not proceeded very far when he began to be afflicted with a dread premonition of Taylor's presence somewhere in the vicinity.

A clammy sweat broke out on the big man; a panic of fear seized him, and he began to creep backward, out of the thicket. And by the time Taylor reached his vantage-point, Carrington was crouching at the thicket's edge, near the rock where he had been concealed, oppressed with a conviction that Taylor was working his way toward him through the thicket.

The big man waited, his nerves taut, his muscles quivering and cringing at the thought that any instant a bullet sent at him by Taylor might strike him. For he knew that Taylor had come for him; he was now convinced that Marion Harlan *had* gone to the Arrow, that she had told Taylor what had happened to her, and that

Taylor had come straight to the big house to punish him for his misdeeds.

And Carrington had a dread of the sort of punishment Taylor had dealt him upon a former occasion, and he wanted no more of it. That was why he had used his pistol instantly upon recognizing Taylor. He wished, now, that he had not been so hasty; for he had taken the initiative, and Taylor would not scruple to imitate him.

In fact, he was so certain that at that moment Taylor was creeping upon him from some point with the fury of murder in his heart, that he got to his feet and, looking over the top of the rock, searched with wild eyes for his horse. And when he saw the animal not more than twenty or thirty feet from him, he could not longer resist the panic that had seized him. Crouching, he ran for several yards on his hands and feet and then, nearing his horse, he stood upright and ran for it.

As he ran he cringed, for he expected a pistol-shot to greet his appearance at the side of his horse. But no report came, and he reached the horse, threw himself into the saddle and raced the animal down the slope.

He was conscious of a pulse of elation, for he thought he had eluded Taylor, but just as his horse struck the edge of the big level Carrington looked back, to see Spotted Tail slipping down the slope with a smooth swiftness that terrified the big man.

He turned then and began to ride as he had never ridden before. The animal under him was strong, courageous, and speedy; but Carrington knew he would have need of all those sterling qualities if he hoped to escape the iron-hearted horse Taylor bestrode. And so Carrington leaned forward, trying to lighten the load, slapping the beast's neck with the palm of his hand, urging him with his voice—coaxing him to the best endeavors. For Carrington knew that somewhere in the vast expanse of grass land and spread before him Keats and his men must be. And his only hope lay in reaching them before the avenger, astride the big horse that was speeding on his trail like a black thunderbolt, could bring his rider within pistol-shot distance of him.

But Carrington had not gone more than half a mile when he realized that the race was to be a short one. Twice after leaving the edge of the slope Carrington looked back. The first time Spotted Tail seemed to be far away; and the next time the big, black animal was so close that Carrington cried out hoarsely.

And then as Carrington felt the distance being shortened—as he felt the presence of the black horse almost at the withers of his own animal—heard the breathing of the big pursuing beast, he knew that he was not to be shot.

Before he could swing his own horse to escape, the big, black horse was beside his own, and one of Taylor's

arms shot out, the fingers gripping the collar of the big man's coat. Then with a vicious pull, swinging the black horse wide, Taylor jerked Carrington out of the saddle, so that he fell sidewise into the deep grass—while the black horse, eager for a run, and not immediately responding to Taylor's pull on the reins, ran some feet before he halted and wheeled.

And when he did finally face toward the spot where the big man had been jerked from the saddle, it was to face a succession of flame-streaks that shot from the spot where Carrington stood trying his best to send into Taylor a bullet that would put an end to the horrible presentiment of death that now filled the big man's heart.

He emptied his pistol and saw the black horse coming steadily toward him, its rider erect in the saddle, seeming not to heed the savagely barking weapon. And when the gun was empty, Carrington threw it from him and began to run. He ran, and with grim mockery, Taylor followed him a little distance—followed him until Carrington, exhausted, his breath coming in great coughing gasps, could run no farther. And then Taylor brought the big black to a halt near him, slid easily out of the saddle, and stepped forward to look into Carrington's face, his own stiff and set, his eyes gleaming with a passion that made the other man groan hopelessly.

"Now, you miserable whelp!" said Taylor.

He lunged forward and the bodies of the two men made

a swaying blot out of which came the sounds of blows, bitter and savage.

The little broken-nosed man laughed a little in recollection of Carrington's words about Martha. The big man had let him off easily, and he was properly grateful. And yet his gratitude did not prevent him from betraying curiosity; and he watched the front of the house for Carrington's reappearance, wondering what he meant to do with the white girl, now that he had her.

Still watching the front porch, he saw Carrington run for his horse, leap upon it and sink down the side of the slope.

The little man then ran to the front of the house and, concealed among the trees, watched the duel that was waged in the moonlight. He saw Carrington break from the thicket, mount his horse and race out into the plain; he saw Taylor—for he had recognized him—send Spotted Tail after Carrington. But he did not see the finish of the race, nor did he see what followed. But some minutes later he saw a big, black horse tearing toward him from the spot where the race had ended. He muttered gutturally and profanely, leaped on his horse and sent it plunging down the trail toward Dawes, his face ghastly with fear.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE WILL OF THE MOB

PARSONS had always been an unemotional man. His own character being immune to the little twinging impulses of humanness that grow to generous and unselfish deeds, he had looked with derision upon all persons who betrayed concern for their fellow-men. And so Parsons had lived apart from his fellows; he had watched them from across the gulf of disinterest, where emotion was foreign.

But tonight Parsons was learning what emotion is. Not from others, but from himself. Emotions—thousands of them seethed in his brain and heart. He was in an advanced state of hysteria when he rode down the Dawes trail with Marion Harlan. For there was the huge, implacable, ruthless, and murderous Carrington, whom he had just passed on the trail, to menace his very life—and he knew that just as soon as Carrington returned to the big house and found Marion gone and the guard dead, he would ride back to Dawes, seeking vengeance. And Carrington would know it was Parsons who had robbed him of the girl; for Carrington would inquire, and would discover that he had ridden into town

with Marion. And when Parsons and Marion rode into Dawes fear, stark, abject, and naked, was in the man's soul.

Dawes was aflame with light as the two passed down the street; and Parsons left the girl to sit on her horse in front of a darkened store, while he rode down the street, peering into other stores, alight and inviting. He hardly knew what he did want. He knew, however, that there was little time, for at any minute now Carrington might come thundering into town on his errand of vengeance; and whatever Parsons did must be done quickly.

He chose the second store he came to. He thought the place was a billiard-room until he entered and stood just inside the door blinking at the lights; and then he knew it was a saloon, for he saw the bar, the back-bar behind it, littered with bottles, and many tables scattered around. More, there were perhaps a hundred men in the place—some of them drinking; and at the sight of them all, realizing the mightiness of their number, Parsons raised his hands aloft and screamed frenziedly:

“Men! There's been a crime committed tonight! At the Huggins house! Carrington did it! He abducted my niece! I want you men to help me! Carrington is going to kill me! And I want you to protect my niece!”

For an instant after Parsons' voice died in a breathless gasp, for he blurted his story, the words coming in a stream, with hardly a pause between them; there was an

odd, strained silence. Then a man far back in the room guffawed loudly:

"Plumb loco. Too much forty-rod!"

There was a half-hearted gale of laughter at the man's taunt; and then many men were around Parsons, ready to laugh and jeer. And while some of the men peered at Parsons, cynically inspecting him for signs of drunkenness, several others ran to the open door and looked out into the street.

"There's somethin' in his yappin', boys," stated a man who returned from the door; "there's a gal out here, sure enough, setting on a hoss, waitin'."

There was a concerted rush outside to see the girl, and Parsons was shoved and jostled until he, too, was forced to go out. And by the time Parsons reached Marion's side she had been questioned by the men. And wrathful curses arose from the lips of men around her.

"Didn't I know he was that kind of a skunk!" shouted a man near Parsons. "I knowed it as soon as he beat Taylor out of the election!"

"I'm for stringin' the scum up!" yelled another man. "This town can git along without guys that go around abductin' wimmen!"

There were still other lurid and threatening comments. And many profane epithets rose, burdened with menace, for Carrington. But the girl, humiliated, weak, and trembling, did not hear all of them. She saw other men

emerging from doorways—all of them running toward her to join those who had come out of the saloon. And then she saw a woman coming toward her, the men making a pathway for her—a motherly looking woman who, when she came near the girl, smiled up at her sympathetically and reached up her hands to help the girl out of the saddle.

Marion slipped down, and the woman's arms went around her. And with many grimly pitying glances from the men in the crowd about her, which parted to permit her to pass, she was led into a private dwelling at a little distance down the street, into a cozy room where there were signs of decency and refinement. The woman placed the girl in a chair, and stood beside her, smoothing her hair and talking to her in low, comforting tones; while outside a clamor rose and a confused mutter of many voices out of which she began to catch sentences, such as:

“Let's fan it to the big house an' git him!”

“There's too many crooks in this town—let's run 'em out!” “What in hell did he come here for?” “Judge Littlefield is just as bad—he cheated Taylor out of the election!” “That's right,” answered another voice. “Taylor's our man!”

“They are all wrought up over this, my dear,” said the woman. “For a long time there has been an undercurrent of dissatisfaction over the way they cheated Quinton Taylor out of the mayoralty. I don't think it

was a bit fair. And," she continued, "there are other things. They have found out that Carrington is behind a scheme to steal the water rights from the town—something he did to the board of directors of the irrigation company, I believe. And he has had his councilmen pass laws to widen some streets and open new ones. And the well-informed call it a steal, too. Mr. Norton has stirred up a lot of sentiment against Carrington and Danforth, and all the rest of them. Secretly, that is. And there is that murder charge against Quinton Taylor," went on the woman. "That is preposterous! Taylor was the best friend Larry Harlan ever had!"

But the girl turned her head, and her lips quivered, for the mention of Taylor had brought back to her the poignant sense of loss that she had felt when she had learned of the charge against Taylor. She bowed her head and wept silently, the woman trying again to comfort her, while outside the noise and tumult grew in volume—threatening violence.

By the time Marion Harlan had dropped into the chair in the room of the house into which the woman had taken her, the crowd that had collected in the street was packed and jammed against the buildings on each side of it.

Those who had come late demanded to be told what had happened; and some men lifted Parsons to the back of his horse, and with their hands on his legs, bracing

him, Parsons repeated the story of what had occurred. More—yielding to the frenzy that had now taken possession of his senses, he told of Carrington's plotting against the town; of the man's determination to loot and steal everything he could get his hands on. He told them of his own culpability; he assured them he had been as guilty as Carrington and Danforth—who was a mere tool, though as unscrupulous as Carrington. He gave them an account of Carrington's stewardship of his own money; and he related the story of Carrington's friendship with the governor, connecting Carrington's trip to the capital with the stealing of the election from Taylor.

It is the psychology of the mob that it responds in some measure to the frenzy of the man who agitates it. So it was with the great crowd that now swarmed the wide street of Dawes. Partisan feeling—all differences of opinion that in other times would have barred concerted action—was swept away by the fervent appeal Parsons made, and by his complete and scathing revelation of the iniquitous scheme to rob the town.

A great sigh arose as Parsons finished and was drawn down, his hat off, his hair ruffled, his eyes gleaming with the strength of the terrible frenzy he was laboring under. The crowd muttered; voices rose sharply; there was an impatient movement; a concerted stiffening of bodies and a long pause, as of preparation.

Aroused, seething with passion, with a vindictive desire for action, swift and ruthless, the crowd waited—waited for a leader. And while the pause and the mutterings continued, the leader came.

It was the big, grim-faced Bothwell, at the head of the Arrow outfit. With his horse in a dead run, the other horses of the outfit crowding him close, Bothwell brought his horse to a sliding halt at the edge of the crowd.

Bothwell's eyes were ablaze with the light of battle; and he stood in his stirrups, looming high above the heads of the men around him, and shouted:

"Where's my boss—Squint Taylor?" And before anyone could answer—"Where's that damned coyote Carrington? Where's Danforth? What's wrong here?"

It was Parsons who answered him. Parsons, again clambering into the saddle from which he had spoken, now shrieking shrilly:

"It's Carrington's work! He abducted Marion Harlan, my niece. He's a scoundrel and a thief, and he is trying to ruin this town!"

There was a short silence as Parsons slid again to the ground, and then the man growled profanely:

"Let's run the whole bunch out of town! Start some-thin', Bothwell!"

Bothwell laughed, a booming bellow of grim mirth that stirred the crowd to movement. "We've been startin'

somethin'! This outfit is out for a clean-up! There's been too much sneakin' an' murderin'; an' too many fake warrants flyin' around, with a bunch like them Keats guys sent out to kill innocent men. Damn their hides! Let's get 'em—all of 'em!"

He flung his horse around and leaped it between the other horses of the Arrow outfit, sending it straight to the doors of the city hall. Closing in behind him, the other members of the Arrow outfit followed; and behind them the crowd, now able to center its passion upon something definite, rushed forward—a yelling, muttering, turbulent mass of men intent to destroy the things which the common conscience loathes.

It seemed a lashing sea of retribution to Danforth and Judge Littlefield, who were in the mayor's office, a little group of their political adherents around them. At the first sign of a disturbance, Danforth had attempted to gather his official forces with the intention of preserving order. But only these few had responded, and they, white-faced, feeling their utter impotence, were standing in the room, terror-stricken, when Bothwell and the men of the Arrow outfit, with the crowd yelling behind them, entered the door of the office.

The little, broken-nosed man had done well to leave the vicinity of the big house before Taylor arrived there. For when Taylor emerged from the front room, in which

the light still burned, his soul was still in the grip of a lust to slay.

He was breathing fast when he emerged from the house, for what he saw there had puzzled him—the guard lying on the floor and Marion gone—and he stood for an instant on the porch, scanning the clearing and the woods around the house with blazing eyes, his guns in hand.

The silence around the house was deep and solemn now, and over Taylor stole a conviction that Carrington had sent Marion to Dawes in charge of some of his men; having divined that he would come for her. But Taylor did not act upon the conviction instantly. He ran to the stable, stormed through it—and the other buildings in the cluster around the ranchhouse; and finding no trace of men or girl, he at last leaped on Spotted Tail and sent him thundering over the trail toward Dawes.

When he arrived in town a swaying, shouting, shooting mob jammed the streets. He brought his horse to a halt on the edge of the crowd that packed the street in front of the city hall, and demanded to know what was wrong.

The man shouted at him:

“Hell’s to pay! Carrington abducted Marion Harlan, an’ that little guy—Parsons—rescued her. An’ Parsons made a speech, tellin’ folks what Carrington an’ Danforth an’ all the rest of the sneakin’ coyotes have

done, an' we're runnin' the scum out of town!" And then, before Taylor could ask about the girl, the man raised his voice to a shrill yell:

"It's Squint Taylor, boys! Squint Taylor! Stand back an' let ol' Squint take a hand in this here deal!"

There was a wild, concerted screech of joy. It rose like the shrieking of a gale; it broke against the buildings that fringed the street; it echoed and reechoed with terrific resonance back and forth over the heads of the men in the crowd. It penetrated into the cozy room of a private dwelling, where sat a girl who started at the sound and sat erect, her face paling, her eyes, glowing with a light that made the motherly looking woman say to her, softly:

"Ah, then you *do* believe in him, my dear!"

It was when the noise and the tumult had subsided that Taylor went to her. For he had been told where he might find her by men who smiled sympathetically at his back as he walked down the street toward the private dwelling.

She was at the door as soon as he, for she had been watching from one of the front windows, and had seen him come toward the house.

And when the motherly looking woman saw them in each other's arms, the moon and the light from within the house revealing them to her, and to the men in the

crowd who watched from the street, she smiled gently. What the two said to each other will never be known, for their words were drowned in the cheer that rose from hoarse-voiced men who knew that words are sometimes futile and unnecessary.

CHAPTER XXXV

TRIUMPH AT LAST

A MONTH later, Taylor walked to the front door of the Arrow ranchhouse and stood on the threshold looking out over the great sweep of green-brown plain that reached eastward to Dawes.

A change had come over Taylor. His eyes had a gentler light in them—as though they had seen things that had taken the edge off his sterner side; and there was an atmosphere about him that created the impression that his thoughts were at this moment far from violence.

“Mr. Taylor!” said a voice behind him—from the front room. There had been an undoubted accent on the “Mr.” And the voice was one that Taylor knew well; the sound of it deepened the gentle gleam in his eyes.

“Mrs. Taylor,” he answered, imparting to the “Mrs.” exactly the emphasis the voice had placed on the other.

There was a laugh behind him, and then the voice again, slightly reproachful: “Oh, that sounds so *awfully* formal, Squint!”

“Well,” he said, “you started it.”

“I like ‘Squint’ better,” said the voice.

"I'm hoping you keep on liking Squint all the days of your life," he returned.

"I was speaking of names," declared the voice.

"Doan' yo' let her fool yo', Mr. Squint!" came another voice, "fo' she think a heap mo' of you than she think of yo' name!"

"Martha!" said the first voice in laughing reproof, "I vow I shall send you away some day!"

And then there was a clumping step on the floor, and Martha's voice reached the door as she went out of the house through the kitchen:

"I's goin' to the bunkhouse to expostulate wif that lazy Bud Hemmingway. He tole me this mawnin' he's gwine feed them hawgs — an' he ain't done it!"

And then Mrs. Taylor appeared at the door and placed an arm around her husband's neck, drawing his head over to her and kissing him.

She looked much like the Marion Harlan who had left the Arrow on a night about a month before, though there was a more eloquent light in her eyes, and a tenderness had come over her that made her whole being radiate.

"Don't you think you had better get ready to go to Dawes, dear?" she suggested.

"I like that better than 'Squint' even," he grinned.

For a long time they stood in the doorway very close together. And then Mrs. Taylor looked up with grave eyes at her husband.

"Won't you please let me look at *all* of father's note to you, Squint?" she asked.

"That can't be done," he grinned at her. "For," he added, "that day after I let you read part of it I burnt it. It's gone—like a lot of other things that are not needed now!"

"But what did it say—that part that you wouldn't let me read?" she insisted.

"It said," he quoted, "'I want you to marry her, Squint.' And I have done so—haven't I?"

"Was that *all*?" she persisted.

"I'd call that plenty!" he laughed.

"Well," she sighed, "I suppose that will have to be sufficient. But get ready, dear; they will be waiting for you!" She left him and went into a room, from where she called back to him: "It won't take me long to dress." And then, after an interval: "Where do you suppose Uncle Elam went?"

He scowled out of the doorway; then turned and smiled. "He didn't say. And he lost no time saying farewell to Dawes, once he got his hands on the money Carrington left." Taylor's smile became a laugh, low and full of amusement.

Shortly Mrs. Taylor appeared, attired in a neat riding-habit, and Taylor donned coat and hat, and they went arm in arm to the corral gate, where their horses were standing, having been roped, saddled, and bridled by the

"lazy" Bud Hemmingway, who stood outside the bunk-house grinning at them.

"Well, good luck!" Bud called after them as they rode toward Dawes.

Lingering much on the way, and stopping at the Mul-larky cabin, they finally reached the edge of town and were met by Neil Norton, who grinned widely when he greeted them.

Norton waved a hand at Dawes. As in another time, Dawes was arrayed in holiday attire, swathed in a riot of color — starry bunting, flags, and streamers, with hundreds of Japanese lanterns suspended festoonlike across the streets. And now, as Taylor and the blushing, moist-eyed woman at his side rode down the street, a band on a platform near the station burst into music, its brazen-tongued instruments drowning the sound of cheering.

"We got that from Lazette," grinned Norton. "We had to have *some* noise! As I told you the other day," he went on, speaking loudly, so that Taylor could hear him above the tumult, "it is all fixed up. Judge Littlefield stayed on the job here, because he promised to be good. He hadn't really done anything, you know. And after we made Danforth and the five councilmen resign that night, and saw them aboard the east-bound the next morning, we made Littlefield wire the governor about what had happened. Littlefield went to the capital shortly afterward and told the governor *some* things that

astonished him. And the governor appointed you to fill Danforth's unexpired term. But, of course, that was only an easy way for the governor to surrender. So everything is lovely."

Norton paused, out of breath.

And Taylor smiled at his wife. "Yes," he said, as he took her arm, "this is a mighty good little old world — if you treat it right."

"And if you stay faithful," added the moist-eyed woman.

"And if you fall in love," supplemented Taylor.

"And when the people of a town want to honor you," added Norton significantly.

And then, arm in arm, followed by Norton, Taylor and his wife rode forward, their horses close together, toward the great crowd of people that jammed the street around the band-stand, their voices now raised above the music that blared forth from the brazen instruments.

SQUARE DEAL SANDERSON

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I The North Trail	1
II A Man's Curiosity	7
III "Square" Deal Sanderson	18
IV In Which a Man Is Sympathetic . .	26
V Water and Kisses	41
VI Sanderson Lies	50
VII Kisses—A Man Refuses Them . . .	66
VIII The Plotters	72
IX The Little Man Talks	79
X Plain Talk	94
XI The Ultimatum	100
XII Dale Moves	103
XIII A Plot that Worked	114
XIV The Voice of the Coyote	128
XV Dale Pays a Visit	134
XVI The Hand of the Enemy	150
XVII The Trail Herd	161
XVIII Checked by the System	166
XIX A Question of Brands	172
XX Devil's Hole	183
XXI A Man Borrows Money	196

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXII	A Man from the Abyss 211
XXIII	The Gunman 216
XXIV	Concerning a Woman 220
XXV	A Man Is Aroused 227
XXVI	A Man Is Hanged 241
XXVII	The Ambush 254
XXVIII	Nyland Meets a Killer 267
XXIX	Nyland's Vengeance 277
XXX	The Law Takes a Hand 283
XXXI	The Fugitive 291
XXXII	Winning a Fight 299
XXXIII	A Man Leaves Okar 305
XXXIV	A Man Gets a Square Deal 311
XXXV	A Deal in Love 319

Square Deal Sanderson

CHAPTER I

THE NORTH TRAIL

AN HOUR before, Deal Sanderson had opened his eyes. He had been comfortably wrapped in his blanket; his head had been resting on a saddle seat. His sleep over, he had discovered that the saddle seat felt hard to his cheek. In changing his position he had awakened. His face toward the east, he had seen a gray streak widening on the horizon—a herald of the dawn.

Sanderson found what seemed to be a softer spot on the saddle, snuggled himself in the blanket, and went to sleep again. Of course he had not neglected to take one sweeping glance around the camp while awake, and that one glance had convinced him that the camp was in order.

The fire had long since gone out—there was a heap of white ashes to mark the spot where it had been. His big brown horse—Streak—unencumbered by rope or leather, was industriously cropping

the dew-laden blades of some bunch-grass within a dozen yards of him; and the mighty desolation of the place was as complete as it had seemed when he had pitched his camp the night before.

Sanderson reveled in the luxury of complete idleness. He grinned at the widening streak of dawn as he closed his eyes. There would be no vitriolic-voiced cook to bawl commands at him *this* morning. And no sour-faced range boss to issue curt orders.

In an hour or so—perhaps in two hours—Sanderson would crawl out of his blanket, get his own breakfast, and ride northeastward. He was a free agent now, and would be until he rode in to the Double A to assume his new duties.

Judging by the light, Sanderson had slept a full hour when he again awakened. He stretched, yawned, and grinned at the brown horse.

“You’re still a-goin’ it, Streak, eh?” he said, aloud. “I’d say you’ve got a medium appetite. There’s times when I envy you quite considerable.”

Reluctantly Sanderson sat up and looked around. He had pitched his camp at the edge of a thicket of alder and aspen near a narrow stream of water in a big arroyo. Fifty feet from the camp rose the sloping north wall of the arroyo, with some dwarf spruce trees fringing its edge. Sanderson had taken a look at the section of country visible from the ar-

royo edge before pitching his camp. There were featureless sand hills and a wide stretch of desert.

Sanderson started to get to his feet. Then he sat down again, stiffening slowly, his right hand slipping quickly to the butt of the pistol at his right hip. His chin went forward, his lips straightened, and his eyes gleamed with cold alertness.

A horseman had appeared from somewhere in the vast space beyond the arroyo edge. Sanderson saw the outlines of animal and rider as they appeared for an instant, partly screened from him by the trees and undergrowth on the arroyo edge. Then horse and rider vanished, going northward, away from the arroyo, silently, swiftly.

Schooled to caution by his long experience in a section of country where violence and sudden death were not even noteworthy incidents of life, and where a man's safety depended entirely upon his own vigilance and wisdom, Sanderson got up carefully, making no noise, slipped around the thicket of alder, crouched behind a convenient rock, huge and jagged, and waited.

Perhaps the incident was closed. The rider might be innocent of any evil intentions; he might by this time be riding straight away from the arroyo. That was for Sanderson to determine.

The rider of the horse — a black one — had seemed

to be riding stealthily, leaning forward over the black horse's mane as though desirous of concealing his movements as much as possible. From whom?

It had seemed that he feared Sanderson would see him; that he had misjudged his distance from the gully — thinking he was far enough away to escape observation, and yet not quite certain, crouching in the saddle to be on the safe side in case he was nearer than he had thought.

Sanderson waited — for only a few minutes actually, but the time seemed longer. Then, just when he was mentally debating an impulse to climb to the top of the gully, to see if the rider was in sight, he heard a sound as of a heavy body crashing through some underbrush, and saw two riders skirting the edge of the arroyo near him.

They halted their horses back of the spruce trees near the arroyo edge. The rank undergrowth in the timber prevented them seeing Sanderson's horse — which was further concealed by the thicket of alder.

The men, however, did not look into the arroyo. Their attention and interest appeared to be centered upon the actions of the first horseman. Sitting erect in their saddles, they shaded their eyes with their hands and gazed northward.

After a short look, one of the men laughed, unpleasantly.

“Sneakin’—he is,” said the one who laughed. “Knows we’re campin’ on his trail, an’ reckons on givin’ us the slip. I never thought Bill would go back on his friends thataway. We’ll make him sweat, damn him!”

The other cursed, also. “Hoggin’ it, he is,” he said. “I ain’t never trusted him. He won’t divvy, eh? Well, he won’t need it where he’s goin’.”

Both laughed. Then one said, coldly: “Well, I reckon we won’t take chances on losin’ him again—like we did last night. We’ll get him right now!”

They urged their horses away from the edge of the gully. Sanderson could hear the clatter of hoofs, receding. He had heard, plainly, all the conversation between the two.

There was a grin of slight relief on Sanderson’s face. The men were not aiming at him, but at the first rider. It was clear that all were concerned in a personal quarrel which was no concern of Sanderson’s. It was also apparent to Sanderson that the two men who had halted at the edge of the arroyo were not of the type that contributed to the peace and order of the country.

Plainly, they were of the lower strata of riffraff which had drifted into the West to exact its toll from a people who could not claim the protection of a law that was remote and impotent.

Sanderson suspected that the first rider had been concerned in some lawless transaction with the other two, and that the first rider had decamped with the entire spoils. That much was indicated by the words of the two. Dire punishment for the first man was imminent.

Sanderson had no sympathy for the first rider. He felt, though, a slight curiosity over the probable outcome of the affair, and so, working rapidly, he broke camp, threw saddle and bridle on the white horse, strapped his slicker to the cantle of the saddle, and rode the brown horse up the slope of the arroyo, taking the direction in which the three men had disappeared.

CHAPTER II

A MAN'S CURIOSITY

BY THE time Sanderson urged the brown horse up the crest of the slope, the men he had determined to follow were far out in the desert. Sanderson could see them, though the distance was considerable, riding the crest of a ridge, directly northeastward. As that was following the general direction in which Sanderson wanted to travel, he was highly pleased.

"They're company," he told himself as he rode; "an' I've been a heap lonesome."

The men were not traveling fast. At times, when the first rider was compelled to traverse high ground, Sanderson could see him—horse and rider faintly outlined against the sky. Sanderson would note the figure of the first rider, then watch the point at which the first rider appeared until the others reached that point. Then, noting the elapsed time, he could estimate the distance at which the pursuers followed.

"I reckon they're gainin' on him," was Sanderson's mental comment when an hour later he saw

the first rider appear for a moment on the sky line, vanish, reappear for an instant, only to be followed within a few minutes by the figures of the other men.

Sanderson was closing up the space that separated him from the two men, and by that medium he knew they were not traveling rapidly, for the brown horse was loping slowly. Thus he knew that the first man was not yet aware that he was being followed.

But some time later to Sanderson's ears was borne the faint, muffled report of a firearm, and he smiled solemnly.

"That first guy will know, now," he told himself.

Sanderson kept steadily on. In half an hour he heard half a dozen rifle reports in quick succession. He could see the smoke puffs of the weapons, and he knew the pursuit was over.

The second riders had brought the first to bay in a section of broken country featured by small, rock-strewn hills. By watching the smoke balloon upward, Sanderson could determine the location of the men.

It seemed to Sanderson that the two had separated, one swinging westward and the other eastward, in an endeavor to render hazardous any concealment the other might find. It was the old game of getting an enemy between two fires, and Sanderson's lips

curved with an appreciative grin as he noted the fact.

"Old-timers," he said.

It was not Sanderson's affair. He told himself that many times as he rode slowly forward. To his knowledge the country was cursed with too many men of the type the two appeared to be, and as he had no doubt that the other man was of that type also, they would be doing the country a service were they to annihilate one another.

Sanderson, though, despite his conviction, felt a pulse of sympathy for the first rider. It was that emotion which impelled him to keep going cautiously forward when, by all the rules of life in that country, he should have stood at a distance to allow the men to fight it out among themselves.

Sanderson's interest grew as the fight progressed. When he had approached as far as he safely could without endangering his own life and that of Streak, he dismounted at the bottom of a small hill, trailed the reins over Streak's head and, carrying his rifle, made his way stealthily to the crest of the hill. There, concealed behind an irregularly shaped boulder, he peered at the combatants.

He had heard several reports while dismounting and ascending the hill, and by the time he looked over the crest he saw that the battle was over.

He saw the three men grouped about a cluster of rocks on a hill not more than a hundred yards distant. Two of the men were bending over the third, who was stretched out on his back, motionless. It appeared to Sanderson that the two men were searching the pockets of the other, for they were fumbling at the other's clothing and, seemingly, putting something into their own pockets.

Sanderson scowled. Now that the fight was over, he was at liberty to investigate; the ethics of life in the country did not forbid that — though many men had found it as dangerous as interference.

Sanderson stood up, within full view of the two men, and hailed them.

“What's bitin' you guys?” he said.

The two men wheeled, facing Sanderson. The latter's answer came in the shape of a rifle bullet, the weapon fired from the hip of one of the men — a snapshot.

Sanderson had observed the movement almost as soon as it had begun, and he threw himself headlong behind the shelter of the rock at his side as the bullet droned over his head.

If Sanderson had entertained any thought of the two men being representatives of the law, trailing a wrongdoer, that thought would have been dispelled by the action of the men in shooting at him.

He was now certain the men were what he had taken them to be, and he grinned felinely as he squirmed around until he got into a position from which he could see them. But when he did get into position the men had vanished.

However, Sanderson was not misled. He knew they had secreted themselves behind some of the rocks in the vicinity, no doubt to wait a reasonable time before endeavoring to discover whether the bullet had accomplished its sinister object.

Sanderson's grin grew broader. He had the men at a disadvantage. Their horses, he had observed before calling to them, were in a little depression at the right — and entirely out of reach of the men.

To get to them they would have to expose themselves on an open stretch between the spot where the horses were concealed and the hill on which they were secreted, and on the open stretch they would be fair targets for Sanderson.

The men had brought Sanderson into the fight, and he no longer had any scruples. He was grimly enjoying himself, and he laid for an hour, flat on his stomach behind the rock, his rifle muzzle projecting between two medium-sized stones near the base of the large rock, his eye trained along the barrel, watching the crest of the hill on which the men were concealed.

The first man was dead. Sanderson could see him, prone, motionless, rigid.

Evidently the two men were doubtful. Certainly they were cautious. But at the end of an hour their curiosity must have conquered them, for Sanderson, still alert and watchful, saw a dark blot slowly appear from around the bulging side of a rock.

The blot grew slowly larger, until Sanderson saw that it appeared to be the crown of a hat. That it was a hat he made certain after a few seconds of intent scrutiny; and that it was a hat without any head in it he was also convinced, for he held his fire. An instant later the hat was withdrawn. Then it came out again, and was held there for several seconds.

Sanderson grinned. "I reckon they think I'm a yearlin'," was his mental comment.

There was another long wait. Sanderson could picture the two men arguing the question that must deeply concern them: "Which shall be the first to show himself?"

"I'd bet a million they're drawin' straws," grinned Sanderson.

Whether that method decided the question Sanderson never knew. He knew, however, that a hat was slowly coming into view around a side of the rock, and he was positive that this time there was a head

in the hat. He could not have told how he knew there was a head in the hat, but that was his conviction.

The hat appeared slowly, gradually taking on definite shape in Sanderson's eyes, until, with a cold grin, he noted some brown flesh beneath it, and a section of dark beard.

Sanderson did not fire, then. The full head followed the hat, then came a man's shoulders. Nothing happened. The man stepped from behind the rock and stood out in full view. Still nothing happened.

The man grinned.

"I reckon we got him, Cal," he said. His voice was gloating. "I reckoned I'd got him; he tumbled sorta offish — like it had got him in the guts. That's what I aimed for, anyway. I reckon he done suffered some, eh?" He guffawed, loudly.

Then the other man appeared. He, too, was grinning.

"I reckon we'll go see. If you got him where you said you got him, I reckon he done a lot of squirmin'. Been followin' us — you reckon?"

They descended the slope of the hill, still talking. Evidently, Sanderson's silence had completely convinced them that they had killed him.

But halfway down the hill, one of the men, watching the rock near Sanderson as he walked, saw the

muzzle of Sanderson's rifle projecting from between the two rocks.

For the second time since the appearance of Sanderson on the scene the man discharged his rifle from the hip, and for the second time he missed the target.

Sanderson, however, did not miss. His rifle went off, and the man fell without a sound. The other, paralyzed from the shock, stood for an instant, irresolute, then, seeming to discover from where Sanderson's bullet had come, he raised his rifle.

Sanderson's weapon crashed again. The second man shuddered, spun violently around, and pitched headlong down the slope.

Sanderson came from behind the rock, grinning mirthlessly. He knew where *his* bullets had gone, and he took no precautions when he emerged from his hiding place and approached the men.

"That's all, for you, I reckon," he said.

Leaving them, he went to the top of the hill and bent over the other man. A bullet fairly in the center of the man's forehead told eloquently of the manner of his death.

The man's face was not of so villainous a cast as the others. There were marks of a past refinement on it; as there were also lines of dissipation.

"I reckon this guy was all wool an' a yard wide,

in his time," said Sanderson; "but from the looks of him he was tryin' to live it down. Now, we'll see what them other guys was goin' through his clothes for."

Sanderson knelt beside the man. From an inner pocket of the latter's coat he drew a letter—faded and soiled, as though it had been read much. There was another letter—a more recent one, undoubtedly, for the paper was in much better condition.

Sanderson looked at both envelopes, and finally selected the most soiled one. He hesitated an instant, and then withdrew the contents and read:

MR. WILLIAM BRANSFORD,

Tucson, Arizona.

DEAR BROTHER WILL: The last time I heard from you, you were in Tucson. That was ten years ago, and it seems an awful long time. I suppose it is too much to hope that you are still there, but it is that hope which is making me write this letter.

Will, father is dead. He died yesterday, right after I got here. He asked for you. Do you know what that means? It means he wanted you to come back, Will. Poor father, he didn't really mean to be obstinate, you know.

I shall not write any more, for I am not sure that you will ever read it. But if you do read it, you'll come back, won't you—or write? Please.

Your loving sister,

MARY BRANSFORD.

The Double A Ranch,
Union County, New Mexico.

Sanderson finished reading the letter. Then folding it, he shoved it back into the envelope and gravely drew out the other letter. It bore a later date and was in the same handwriting:

MR. WILLIAM BRANSFORD,
Tucson, Arizona.

DEAR BROTHER WILL: I was so delighted to get your letter. And I am so eager to see you. It has been such a long, long time, hasn't it? Fifteen years, isn't it? And ten years since I even got a letter from you!

I won't remember you, I am sure, for I am only nineteen now, and you were only fifteen when you left home. And I suppose you have grown big and strong, and have a deep, booming voice and a fierce-looking mustache. Well, I shall love you, anyway. So hurry and come home.

I am sending you a telegraph money order for one thousand dollars, for from the tone of your letter it seems things are not going right with you. Hurry home, won't you?

With love,
Your sister,
MARY.

Sanderson finished reading the letter. He meditated silently, turning it over and over in his hands. The last letter was dated a month before. Evidently Bransford had not hurried.

Sanderson searched all the other pockets, and discovered nothing of further interest. Then he stood for a long time, looking down at the man's face, studying it, his own face expressing disapproval.

“Mebbe it’s just as well that he didn’t get to the Double A,” he thought, noting the coarse, brutal features of the other.

“If a girl’s got ideals it’s sometimes a mighty good thing the real guy don’t come along to disabuse them. William ain’t never goin’ to get to the Double A.”

He buried the body in a gully, then he returned to the other men.

Upon their persons he found about nine hundred dollars in bills of small denomination. It made a bulky package, and Sanderson stored it in his slicker. Then he mounted Streak, turned the animal’s head toward the northeast, and rode into the glaring sunshine of the morning.

CHAPTER III

“SQUARE” DEAL SANDERSON

THREE days later, still traveling northeastward, Sanderson felt he must be close to the Double A. Various signs and conclusions were convincing.

In the first place, he had been a week on the trail, and estimating his pace conservatively, that time should bring him within easy riding distance of the place he had set out to seek. There were so many miles to be covered in so many days, and Streak was a prince of steady travelers.

Besides, yesterday at dusk, Sanderson had passed through Las Vegas. Careful inquiry in the latter town had brought forth the intelligence that the Double A was a hundred and seventy-five miles northeastward.

“Country’s short of cow-hands,” said Sanderson’s informer. “If you’re needin’ work, an’ forty a month looks good to you, why, I’d admire to take you on. I’m Gorman, of the Flyin’ U, down the Cimarron a piece.”

“Me an’ work has disagreed,” grinned Sanderson; and he rode on, meditating humorously over the lie.

Work and Sanderson had never disagreed. Indeed, Sanderson had always been convinced that work and he had agreed too well in the past. Except for the few brief holidays that are the inevitable portion of the average puncher who is human enough to yearn for the relaxation of a trip to "town" once or twice a year, Sanderson and work had been inseparable for half a dozen years.

Sanderson's application had earned him the reputation of being "reliable" and "trustworthy"—two terms that, in the lexicon of the cow-country, were descriptive of virtues not at all common. In Sanderson's case they were deserved—more, to them might have been added another, "straight."

Sanderson's trip northeastward had resulted partly from a desire to escape the monotony of old scenes and familiar faces; and partly because one day while in "town" he had listened attentively to a desert nomad, or "drifter," who had told a tale of a country where water was to be the magic which would open the gates of fortune to the eager and serious-minded.

"That country's goin' to blossom!" declared the Drifter. "An' the guy which gets in on the ground floor is goin' to make a clean-up! They's a range there—the Double A—which is right in the middle of things. A guy named Bransford owns her—an'

Bransford's on his last legs. He's due to pass out, *pronto*, or I'm a gopher! He's got a daughter there — Mary — which is a pippin, an' no mistake! But she's sure got a job on her hands, if the ol' man croaks.

“ They's a boy, somewheres, which ain't no good, I've heard, an' if the girl hangs on she's due for an uphill climb. She'll have a fight on her hands, too, with Alva Dale — a big rough devil of a man with a greedy eye on the whole country — an' the girl, too, I reckon — if my eyes is any good. I've seen him look at her — oh, man! If she was any relation to me I'd climb Dale's frame sure as shoot-in'!”

There had been more — the Drifter told a complete story. And Sanderson had assimilated it, without letting the other know he had been affected.

Nor had he mentioned to Burroughs — his employer — a word concerning the real reason for his desire to make a change. Not until he had written to Bransford, and received a reply, did he acquaint Burroughs with his decision to leave. As a matter of fact, Sanderson had delayed his leave-taking for more than a month after receiving Bransford's letter, being reluctant, now that his opportunity had come, to sever those relations that, he now realized, had been decidedly pleasant.

“I’m sure next to what’s eatin’ you,” Burroughs told him on the day Sanderson asked for his “time.” “You’re yearnin’ for a change. It’s a thing that gets hold of a man’s soul—if he’s got one. They ain’t no fightin’ it. I’m sure appreciatin’ what you’ve done for me, an’ if you decide to come back any time, you’ll find me a-welcomin’ you with open arms, as the sayin’ is. You’ve got a bunch of coin comin’—three thousand. I’m addin’ a thousand to that—makin’ her good measure. That’ll help you to start somethin’.”

Sanderson started northeastward without any illusions. A product of the Far Southwest, where the ability to live depended upon those natural, protective instincts and impulses which civilization frowns upon, Sanderson was grimly confident of his accomplishments—which were to draw a gun as quickly as any other man had ever drawn one, to shoot as fast and as accurately as the next man—or a little faster and more accurately; to be alert and self-contained, to talk as little as possible; to listen well, and to deal fairly with his fellow-men.

That philosophy had served Sanderson well. It had made him feared and respected throughout Arizona; it had earned him the sobriquet “Square”—a title which he valued.

Sanderson could not have told, however, just what

motive had impelled him to decide to go to the Double A. No doubt the Drifter's story regarding the trouble that was soon to assail Mary Bransford had had its effect, but he preferred to think he had merely grown tired of life at the Pig-Pen — Burrough's ranch — and that the Drifter's story, coming at the instant when the yearning for a change had seized upon him, had decided him.

He had persisted in that thought until after the finding of the letters in William Bransford's pockets; and then, staring down at the man's face, he had realized that he had been deluding himself, and that he was journeying northeastward merely because he was curious to see the girl whom the Drifter had so vividly described.

Away back in his mind, too, there might have been a chivalrous desire to help her in the fight that was to come with Alva Dale. He had felt his blood surge hotly at the prospect of a fight, with Mary Bransford as the storm center; a passion to defend her had got into his soul; and a hatred for Alva Dale had gripped him.

Whatever the motive, he had come, and since he had looked down into William Bransford's face, he had become conscious of a mighty satisfaction. The two men who had trailed Bransford had been cold-blooded murderers, and he had avenged Bransford

completely. That could not have happened if he had not yielded to the impulse to go to the Double A.

He was glad he had decided to go. He was now the bearer of ill news, but he was convinced that the girl would want to know about her brother—and he must tell her. And now, too, he was convinced that his journey to the Double A had been previously arranged—by Fate, or whatever Providence controls the destinies of humans.

And that conviction helped him to fight down the sense of guilty embarrassment that had afflicted him until now—the knowledge that he was deliberately and unwarrantedly going to the Double A to interfere, to throw himself into a fight with persons with whom he had no previous acquaintance, for no other reason than that his chivalrous instincts had prompted him.

And yet his thoughts were not entirely serious as he rode. The situation had its humorous side.

“Mostly nothin’ turns out as folks figure in the beginnin’,” he told himself. “Otherwise everything would be cut an’ dried, an’ there wouldn’t be a heap of fun in the world—for butters-in. An’ folks which scheme an’ plot, tryin’ to get things that belong to other folks, would have it too easy. There’s got to be folks that wander around, nosin’ into places that they shouldn’t. Eh, Streak?”

Streak did not answer, and Sanderson rode on, smiling gravely.

He made a dry camp that night in a sea of mesquite at the edge of a sand plain, although he knew he could not now be far from the Double A range. And in the early light of the morning he found his judgment vindicated, for stretching before him, still in a northeasterly direction, he saw a great, green-brown level sweeping away from his feet and melting into some rimming mountains—a vast, natural basin of gigantic proportions.

Sanderson was almost at the end of his journey; it was early morning, and he was in no hurry. He leisurely prepared his breakfast, sitting on a flat rock as he ate, and scanning the basin.

Mere bigness had never impressed Sanderson; the West had shown him greater vistas than this mammoth basin. And yet his eyes glowed as he looked out and down at the country that lay, slumbering in the pure white light of the dawn.

He saw, dotting the floor of the basin, the roofs of houses. From his height they seemed to be close together, but Sanderson was not misled, and he knew that they were separated by miles of virgin soil—of sagebrush and yucca, and soapweed and other desert weeds that needed not the magic of water to make them live.

When Sanderson finally mounted Streak, the sun was up. It took Streak two hours to descend the slope leading down into the basin, and when once horse and rider were down, Sanderson dismounted and patted Streak's moist flanks.

“Some drop, eh, Streak?” he said. “But it didn't fool us none. We knowed it was some distance, didn't we? An' they ain't foolin' us about the rest of it, are they? The Drifter said to head toward the Big Peak. The Double A would be right near there—in the foothills. Looks easy, don't it? But I reckon we'll have to hump ourselves to get there by feedin' time, this noon, eh?”

A little later, Streak having rested, Sanderson mounted and rode forward, toward the peak of a majestic mountain that loomed far above them.

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH A MAN IS SYMPATHETIC

IT WAS shortly after noon when Sanderson, urging Streak to the crest of an isolated excrescence of earth surrounded by a level of sage and cactus, saw within several hundred yards of him a collection of buildings scattered on a broad plain that extended back several hundred yards farther until it merged into the rock-faced wall of a butte that loomed upward many feet.

Sanderson halted Streak on the hilltop to glance around. The buildings, evidently, belonged to the Double A ranch, and the country was all the Drifter had claimed for it.

The big stretch of plain—in fact, the entire basin—could be made fertile by the judicious use of water. Sanderson was not an engineer, but he had sufficient natural knowledge of land to enable him to distinguish good land from bad. Besides, near Phoenix he had inspected a gigantic irrigation project, and had talked long with the engineer in charge, and he had learned many things that would not have interested the average cowpuncher.

There was a break in the wall of the butte south of the group of buildings, and out of the break Sanderson could see water tumbling and splashing from one rock ledge to another until it rushed down, forming quite a large stream as it struck the level and swirled hurriedly between two sloping banks near the buildings.

From where Sanderson sat on Streak he could look far back into the break in the butte. The break made a sort of gorge, which widened as it receded, and Sanderson suspected the presence of another basin beyond the butte—in fact, the Drifter had told him of the presence of another basin.

“She’d make some lake, if she was bottled up!” was Sanderson’s mental comment after a long examination.

His gaze became centered upon the buildings and the level surrounding them.

The buildings were ordinary, but the country was rugged and picturesque.

Some foothills—which Sanderson had seen from the far side of the basin that morning—rose from the level toward the south, their pine-clad slopes sweeping sharply upward—a series of gigantic land waves that seemed to leap upward and upward toward the higher peaks of some mountains behind them.

Northward, fringing the edge of the plain that began at the foothills and stretched many miles, were other mountains; eastward the butte extended far, receding, irregular, its jagged walls forming a barrier; southwestward stretched the basin, in a gentle slope that was more noticeable to Sanderson now than it had been while he had been riding during the morning.

The land around the buildings was fertile, for here was water which could be utilized. The land over which Sanderson had been riding all morning, though, was not so fertile; it needed the water that the stream splashing out of the gorge could give it, with proper human manipulation.

All morning Sanderson's thoughts had dwelt upon the serious lack of water in the basin. Now his thoughts grew definitely troubled.

"There's goin' to be hell here—if this thing ain't handled right. The Double A has got lots of water. The other fellows will be wantin' it. They've got to have it."

Sanderson finished his inspection of the place. Then he spoke to Streak, and the big brown horse descended the slope of the hill, struck the level, and cantered slowly toward the ranch buildings near the river.

Sanderson urged the brown horse toward the larg-

est building of the group, and as he rode he straightened in the saddle, rearranged his neckerchief and brushed some of the dust from his clothing—for at this minute his thoughts went to the girl—whom he now knew he had come to see.

Sanderson no longer tried to delude himself. A strange reluctance oppressed him, and a mighty embarrassment seized him; his face grew crimson beneath the coat of tan upon it, and his lungs swelled with a dread eagerness that had gripped him.

“I reckon I’m a damn fool!” he told himself as he forced Streak onward; “I’m comin’ here, not knowin’ why, but still a-comin’.” He grinned, mirthlessly, but went forward.

Heading toward the ranchhouse, he passed a huge building—the stable. Swinging wide around one of its corners, he was about to ride onward toward the ranchhouse, when out of the corners of his eyes he saw some men and horses grouped in front of the stable.

He pulled Streak up with a jerk, swung the animal’s head around and faced the group. There were five horses, saddled and bridled, standing in front of the stable. Sanderson’s eyes noted that in one swift glance. But it was upon a man that Sanderson’s gaze centered as Streak came to a halt.

The man dominated. There were other men stand-

ing in front of the stable—and two women. But the man upon whom Sanderson's gaze rested was the compelling figure.

He was big—rugged, muscular, massive. He saw Sanderson at about the instant Sanderson saw him, and he faced the latter, his chin thrusting, his lips pouting, his eyes gleaming with cold belligerence. He wore a gray woolen shirt, open at the throat, revealing a strong, wide chest.

He was a tawny giant, exuding a force and virility and a compelling magnetism that gripped one instantly. It affected Sanderson; the sight of the man caused Sanderson's eyes to glow with reluctant admiration.

And yet Sanderson disliked the man; he knew instantly that this was Alva Dale, concerning whom the Drifter had spoken; and the glow died out of Sanderson's eyes and was replaced by the steady gleam of premeditated and deliberate hostility.

For an instant there was no word spoken; the glances of the two men met, crossed, and neither man's eyes wavered.

Then the big man spoke, gruffly, shortly, coldly: "What do you want?"

Sanderson smiled faintly. "You runnin' things here?" he said, slowly.

"Hell!" snarled the other, and stepped forward.

"Because if you are," resumed Sanderson, his voice bringing the big man to a halt, "you're the man I'm wantin' to do my gassin' to. If you ain't runnin' things, why, I reckon you ain't in the deal at all."

"Well, I'm runnin' things," sneered the other. "Tell me what you're wantin' or pull your freight out of here, *pronto!*"

"I'm sure some disturbed over my mistake," grinned Sanderson. "You couldn't be anybody but Bransford, or you wouldn't shoot off your gab that reckless. If you're Bransford, I'm apologizin' to you for talkin' back to you. But if you ain't Bransford, get off your hind legs an' talk like a man!"

The big man stiffened, and his eyes glittered malignantly. He moved his feet slightly apart and let his body fall into a crouch. He held that position, though, not moving a finger, when he saw a saturnine smile wreath Sanderson's lips, noted the slight motion with which Sanderson edged Streak around a little, caught the slow, gradual lifting of Sanderson's shoulder—the right; which presaged the drawing of the heavy pistol that swung at Sanderson's right hip.

Both men held their positions for some seconds; and the slow, heavy breathing of the big man indicated his knowledge of the violence that impended—

the violence that, plainly, Sanderson would not retreat from.

Then the big man's body began to relax, and a tinge of color came into his face. He grinned, malevolently, with forced lightness.

"Hell," he said; "you're damned particular! I'm runnin' things here, but I ain't Bransford!"

"I was reckonin' you wasn't," said Sanderson, mockingly. He now ignored the big man, and fixed his gaze on one of the women—the one he felt must be Mary Bransford.

He had found time, while talking with the big man, to look twice at the two women—and he had discovered they were not women at all, but girls. More, he had discovered that one of them looked as he had pictured her many times during the days since he had heard of her from the Drifter.

She was standing slightly aside from the men—and from the other girl. She was pale, her eyes were big and fright-laden, and since Sanderson's coming, she had been looking at him with an intense, wondering and wistful gaze, her hands clasped over her breast, the fingers working stiffly.

Sanderson colored as he looked at her; he was wondering what she would say to him if she knew that he had come to the Double A purposely to see her, and that seeing her he was afflicted with a dis-

mayed embarrassment that threatened to render him speechless.

For she more than fulfilled the promise of what he had expected of her. She was slightly above medium height, though not tall—a lissome, graceful girl with direct, frank eyes.

That was all Sanderson noted. Her hair, he saw, of course—it was done up in bulging knots and folds—and was brown and abundant, and it made him gulp in admiration of it; but he could not have told what her features were like—except that they were what he expected them to be.

“I reckon you’re Mary Bransford, ma’am?” he said to her.

The girl took a step toward him, unclasping her hands.

“Yes,” she said rapidly. “It can’t be that you—that you——”

The big man stepped between the girl and Sanderson, pushing the girl aside and standing before Sanderson. But he spoke to the girl.

“Look here,” he said shortly; “I don’t know what you two are goin’ to palaver about, but whatever it is it’s goin’ to wait until what we set about to do is done.” He looked at Sanderson. “Stranger, we ain’t got no objections to you doin’ all the lookin’ you want to do. But keep your trap shut. Now,

Miss Bransford," he continued, turning to the girl, "we'll get this trial over with. You say them steers which me an' my boys brought over an' put into your corral is Double A steers—that you're sure the brand is yours—an' the earmarks?"

"Ye-es," returned the girl slowly and hesitatingly.

While talking with Sanderson she had unclasped her hands, and now she clasped them again, twining the fingers with a quick, nervous motion. Again her eyes grew wide with fright, and Sanderson saw her looking at the other girl—he saw the other girl stiffen and stand straight, her lips curving scornfully as she returned Miss Bransford's gaze.

Sanderson's lips straightened. And now for the first time he gravely inspected the faces in the group near him.

Two men—cowboys—who stood near the big man, were evidently the "boys" referred to by the latter. Their faces were set and expressionless. Between them stood a rugged, well-built man of about twenty-two or three. His hands were tied behind him, a rope was around his neck, the free end coiled in the hands of one of the two men.

The young man's face was sullen, but his head was held very erect, and his eyes were steady and unwavering as he watched the big man.

The girl at whom Miss Bransford was looking stood near the young man. Sanderson saw her turn from Miss Bransford and look at the young man piteously, her lips quivering suspiciously.

There was another man in the group—an under-sized fellow, pale, emaciated, with big, troubled, and perplexed eyes. Sanderson saw that his hands were clenched, and that his thin lips were pressed so tightly together that they were blue and bloodless.

This man stood slightly apart from the others, as though he had no part in what was going on; though Sanderson could tell from his manner that he was laboring under an intense strain.

Miss Bransford and the big man were the opposing forces in what was transpiring—Sanderson knew that from Miss Bransford's manner of answering the big man's question. Her "yes" had been uttered reluctantly. Her testimony was damaging—she knew it, and her sympathies were with the young man with the rope around his neck.

Sanderson knew nothing of the motives that were actuating the people of this little drama, but he was entirely conscious of the visible forces that were at work.

Plainly, the big man had accused the captive of stealing cattle; he had brought the supposed culprit to face the owner of the stolen stock; he had consti-

tuted himself judge and jury, and was determined to hang the young man.

The two men with the big man were noncommittal. The pale, undersized man was a mere onlooker, whose sympathies were with the accused. Miss Bransford would have been quite willing to have the young man escape punishment, but she could not deny that the cattle in question belonged to her.

Sanderson was in doubt about the other young woman, though obviously she was closely related to him—a wife, or sister—perhaps a sweetheart.

Sanderson studied the young man's face, comparing it with the big man's, and his lips stiffened. He backed Streak slightly and swung crosswise in the saddle, intense interest seizing him.

The big man grinned, first at Miss Bransford, and then at the other girl.

“I reckon that settles it,” he said. “There don't seem to be nothin' more to it. Miss Bransford says the cattle is hers, an' we found them in Ben Nyland's corral. There ain't——”

“Alva Dale, you are a sneak and a liar!”

This was the girl. She had stepped forward until she was within a short pace from the big man. She stood erect, rigid, her hands clenched at her sides, her chin lifted, her eyes flashing with defiant passion.

Dale smirked at her.

“Peggy Nyland,” he said, “you’re handin’ it to me pretty strong, ain’t you? You’d fight for your brother’s life, of course. But I represent the law here, an’ I’ve got to do my duty. You won’t deny that we found them steers in your brother’s corral?”

“No, I can’t deny that!” declared the girl passionately. “You found them there. They were there. But Ben did not put them there. Shall I tell you who did? It was you! I heard a noise in the corral during the night—last night! But I—thought it was just our own cattle. And I did not go out to see.

“Oh, how I wish I had! But Ben didn’t put the Double A cattle in the corral, for Ben was in the house all the time. He went to bed when I did, and I saw him, sleeping in his bunk, when the noise awakened me!”

The girl stepped closer to Dale, her voice vibrating with scorn and loathing.

“If you didn’t put the steers in our corral, you know who did, Alva Dale,” she went on. “And you know why they were put there! You didn’t do it because you wanted Ben’s land—as I’ve heard you have said; you did it to get Ben out of the way so that you could punish me!

“If I had told Ben how you have hounded me—how you have insulted me, Ben would have killed

you long ago. Oh, I ought to have told him, but I was afraid—afraid to bring more trouble to Ben!”

Dale laughed sneeringly as he watched the young man writhe futilely in the hands of his captors.

“Sounds reasonable—an’ dramatic,” he said. “It’d do some good, mebbe, if they was any soft-headed ninnies around that would believe it. But the law ain’t soft-headed. We found them steers in Ben Nyland’s corral—some of them marked with Ben’s brand—the Star—blottin’ out the Double A. An’ Miss Bransford admits the steers are hers. They ain’t nothin’ more to be said.”

“Yes, there is, Dale,” said Miss Bransford. “It is quite evident there has been a mistake made. I am willing to believe Peggy Nyland when she says Ben was asleep in the cabin all night—with her. At any rate, I don’t want any hanging over a few cattle. I want you to let Ben Nyland go.”

Dale wheeled and faced Miss Bransford. His face reddened angrily, but he managed to smile.

“It’s too late, Miss Bransford. The evidence is all in. There’s got to be rules to govern such cases as this. Because you own the steers is no sign you’ve got a right to defeat the aims of justice. I’d like mighty well to accommodate you, but I’ve got my duty to consider, an’ I can’t let him off. Ben Nyland has got to hang, an’ that’s all there is to it!”

There came a passionate outcry from Peggy Nyland; and then she had her arms around her brother's neck, sobbing that she would never let him be hanged.

Miss Bransford's eyes were blazing with rage and scorn as they challenged Dale's. She walked close to him and said something in a low tone to him, at which he answered, though less gruffly than before, that it was "no use."

Miss Bransford looked around appealingly; first at the pale, anemic little man with big eyes, who shifted his feet and looked uncomfortable; then her gaze went to Sanderson who, resting his left elbow on the pommel of the saddle, was watching her with squinting, quizzical eyes.

There was an appeal in Miss Bransford's glance that made the blood leap to Sanderson's face. Her eyes were shining with an eloquent yearning that would have caused him to kill Dale—if he had thought killing the man would have been the means of saving Ben Nyland.

And then Mary Bransford was at his side, her hands grasping his, holding them tightly as her gaze sought his and held it.

"Won't you please do something?" she pleaded. "Oh, if it only could be! That's a mystery to you, perhaps, but when I spoke to you before I was going

to ask you if—if — But then, of course you couldn't be—or you would have spoken before."

Sanderson's eyes glowed with a cold fire. He worked his hands free, patted hers reassuringly, and gently pushed her away from Streak.

He swung down from the saddle and walked to Dale. The big man had his back turned to Sanderson, and when Sanderson reached him he leaned over his shoulder and said gently:

"Look here, Dale."

The latter wheeled, recognizing Sanderson's voice and snarling into the latter's face.

"Well?" he demanded.

Sanderson grinned mildly. "I reckon you've got to let Ben Nyland off, Dale—he ain't guilty. Mebbe I ought to have stuck in my gab before, but I was figurin' that mebbe you wouldn't go to crowdin' him so close. Ben didn't steal no steers; he run them into his corral by my orders."

Dale guffawed loudly and stepped back to sneer at Sanderson. But he had noted the steadiness of the latter's eyes and the sneer faded.

"Bah!" he said. "Your orders! An' who in hell are you?"

"I'm Bill Bransford," said Sanderson quietly, and he grinned mirthlessly at Dale over the two or three feet of space that separated them.

CHAPTER V

WATER AND KISSES

FOR several seconds Dale did not speak. A crimson stain appeared above the collar of his shirt and spread until it covered his face and neck, leaving his cheeks poisonously bloated and his eyes glaring.

But the steady eyes and the cold, deliberate demeanor of Sanderson did much to help Dale regain his self-control—which he did, while Mary Bransford, running forward, tried to throw her arms around Sanderson's neck. She was prevented from accomplishing this design by Sanderson who, while facing Dale, shoved the girl away from him, almost roughly.

"There's time for that after we've settled with Dale," he told the girl gruffly.

Dale had recovered; he sneered. "It's easy enough to make a claim like that, but it's another thing to prove it. How in hell do we know you're Bill Bransford?"

Sanderson's smile was maddening. "I ain't aim-in' to prove nothin'—to you!" he said. But he

reached into a pocket, drew out the two letters he had taken from the real Bransford's pocket, and passed them back to Mary Bransford, still facing Dale.

He grinned at Dale's face as the latter watched Mary while she read the letters, gathering from the scowl that swept over the other's lips that Mary had accepted them as proof of his identity.

"You'll find the most of that thousand you sent me in my slicker," he told the girl. And while Mary ran to Streak, unstrapped the slicker, tore it open, and secured the money, Sanderson watched Dale's face, grinning mockingly.

"O Will—Will!" cried the girl joyously behind Sanderson.

Sanderson's smile grew. "Seems to prove a heap, don't it?" he said to Dale. "I know a little about law myself. I won't be pressin' no charge against Nyland. Take your rope off him an' turn him free. An' then mebbe you'll be accommodatin' enough to hit the breeze while the hittin's good—for me an' Miss—my sister's sort of figurin' on a reunion—us bein' disunited for so long."

He looked at Dale with cold, unwavering eyes until the latter, sneering, turned and ordered his men to remove the rope from Nyland. With his hands resting idly on his hips he watched Dale and the men ride away. Then he shook hands mechanically with

Nyland, permitted Peggy to kiss him—which she did fervently, and led her brother away. Then Sanderson turned, to see Mary smiling and blushing, not more than two or three feet distant.

He stood still, and she stepped slowly toward him, the blush on her face deepening.

“Oh,” she said as she came close to him and placed her hands on his shoulders, “this seems positively brazen—for you seem like a stranger to me.”

Then she deliberately took both his cheeks in her hands, stood on the tips of her toes and kissed him three or four times, squarely on the lips.

“Why, ma’am—” began Sanderson.

“Mary!” she corrected, shaking him.

“Well, ma’am—Mary, that is—you see I ain’t just——”

“You’re the dearest and best brother that ever lived,” she declared, placing a hand over his mouth, “even though you did stay away for so many years. Not another word now!” she warned as she took him by an arm and led him toward the ranchhouse; “not a word about anything until you’ve eaten and rested. Why, you look tired to death—almost!”

Sanderson wanted to talk; he wanted to tell Mary Bransford that he was not her brother; that he had assumed the rôle merely for the purpose of defeating Dale’s aim. His sole purpose had been to help

Mary Bransford out of a difficult situation; he had acted on impulse—an impulse resulting from the pleading look she had given him, together with the knowledge that she had wanted to save Nyland.

Now that the incident was closed, and Nyland saved, he wanted to make his confession, be forgiven, and received into Mary's good graces.

He followed the girl into the house, but as he halted for an instant on the threshold, just before entering, he looked back, to see the little, anemic man standing near the house, looking at him with an odd smile. Sanderson flushed and made a grimace at the little man, whereat the latter's smile grew broad and eloquent.

"What's eatin' him, I wonder?" was Sanderson's mental comment. "He looked mighty fussed up while Dale was doin' the talkin'. Likely he's just tickled—like the rest of them."

Mary led Sanderson into the sitting-room to a big easy-chair, shoved him into it, and stood behind him, running her fingers through his hair. Meanwhile she talked rapidly, telling him of the elder Bransford's last moments, of incidents that had occurred during his absence from the ranch; of other incidents that had to do with her life at a school on the coast; of many things of which he was in complete ignorance.

Desperate over his inability to interrupt her flow of talk, conscious of the falseness of his position, squirming under her caresses, and cursing himself heartily for yielding to the absurd impulse that had placed him in so ridiculous a predicament, Sander-son opened his mouth a dozen times to make his confession, but each time closed it again, unsuccessful.

At last, nerved to the ordeal by the knowledge that each succeeding moment was making his position more difficult, and his ultimate pardon less certain, he wrenched himself free and stood up, his face crimson.

“Look here, ma’am——”

“Mary!” she corrected, shaking a finger at him.

“Mary,” he repeated tonelessly, “now look here,” he went on hoarsely. “I want to tell you that I ain’t the man you take me to be. I’m——”

“Yes, you are,” she insisted, smiling and placing her hands on his shoulders. “You are a real man. I’ll wager Dale thinks so; and Peggy Nyland, and Ben. Now, wait!” she added as he tried to speak. “I want to tell you something. Do you know what would have happened if you had not got here today?”

“I’ll tell you,” she went on again, giving him no opportunity to inject a word. “Dale would have taken the Double A away from me! He told me so! He was over here yesterday, gloating over me. Do

you know what he claims? That I am not a Bransford; that I am merely an adopted daughter—not even a legally adopted one; that father just took me, when I was a year old, without going through any legal formalities.

“Dale claims to have proof of that. He won’t tell me where he got it. He has some sort of trumped-up evidence, I suppose, or he would not have talked so confidently. And he is all-powerful in the basin. He is friendly with all the big politicians in the territory, and is ruthless and merciless. I feel that he would have succeeded, if you had not come.

“I know what he wants; he wants the Double A on account of the water. He is prepared to go any length to get it—to commit murder, if necessary. He could take it away from me, for I wouldn’t know how to fight him. But he can’t take it away from you, Will. And he can’t say you have no claim to the Double A, for father willed it to you, and the will has been recorded in the Probate Court in Las Vegas!

“O Will; I am *so* glad you came,” she went on, stroking and patting his arms. “When I spoke to you the first time, out there by the stable, I was certain of you, though I dreaded to have you speak for fear you would say otherwise. And if it hadn’t been you, I believe I should have died.”

“An’ if you’d find out, now, that I ain’t Will Bransford,” said Sanderson slowly, “what then?”

“That can’t be,” she said, looking him straight in the eyes, and holding his gaze for a long time, while she searched his face for signs of that playful deceit that she expected to see reflected there.

She saw it, evidently, or what was certainly an excellent counterfeit of it—though Sanderson was in no jocular mood, for at that moment he felt himself being drawn further and further into the meshes of the trap he had laid for himself—and she smiled trustfully at him, drawing a deep sigh of satisfaction and laying her head against his shoulder.

“That can’t be,” she repeated. “No man could deceive a woman like that!”

Sanderson groaned, mentally. He couldn’t confess now and at the same time entertain any hope that she would forgive him.

Nor could he—knowing what he knew now of Dale’s plans—brutally tell her the truth and leave her to fight Dale single-handed.

And there was still another consideration to deter him from making a confession. By impersonating her brother he had raised her hopes high. How could he tell her that her brother had been killed, that he had buried him in a desolate section of a far-off desert after taking his papers and his money?

He felt, from her manner when he had tentatively asked her to consider the possibility of his not being her brother, that the truth would kill her, as she had said.

Worse, were he now to inform her of what had happened in the desert, she might not believe him; she might indeed—considering that he already had dealt doubly with her—accuse him of being her brother's murderer!

Again Sanderson groaned in spirit. To confess to her would be to destroy her; to withhold the confession and to continue to impersonate her brother was to act the rôle of a cad.

Sanderson hesitated between a choice of the two evils, and was lost. For she gave him no time for serious and continued thought. Taking him by an arm she led him into a room off the sitting-room, shoving him through the door laughingly.

"That is to be your room," she said. "I fixed it up for you more than a month ago. You go in there and get some sleep. Sleep until dusk. By that time I'll have supper ready. And then, after supper, there are so many things that I want to say to you. So get a good sleep!"

She closed the door and went out, and Sanderson sank into a chair. Later, he locked the door, pulled the chair over near a window—from which he got

a good view of the frowning butte at the edge of the level—and stared out, filled with a sensation of complete disgust.

“Hell,” he said, after a time, “I’m sure a triple-plated boxhead, an’ no mistake!”

CHAPTER VI

SANDERSON LIES

SANDERSON did not sleep. He sat at the window all afternoon, dismally trying to devise a way of escape from the dilemma. He did not succeed. He had gone too far now to make a confession sound reasonably convincing; and he could not desert the girl to Dale. That was not to be thought of. And he was certain that if he admitted the deception, the girl would banish him as though he were a pestilence.

He was hopelessly entangled. And yet, continuing to ponder the situation, he saw that he need not completely yield to pessimism. For though circumstances — and his own lack of foresight — had placed him in a contemptible position — he need not act the blackguard. On the contrary, he could admirably assume the rôle of protector.

The position would not be without its difficulties, and the deception meant that he could never be to Mary Bransford what he wanted to be to her; but he could at least save the Double A for her. That done, and his confession made, he could go on his way, satisfied that he had at least beaten Dale.

His decision made, Sanderson got up, opened the door a trifle, and looked into the sitting-room. It was almost dusk, and, judging from the sounds that reached his ears from the direction of the kitchen, Mary intended to keep her promise regarding "supper."

Feeling guilty, though grimly determined to continue the deception to the end—whatever the end might be—Sanderson stole through the sitting-room, out through the door leading to the porch, and made his way to a shed lean-to back of the kitchen.

There he found a tin washbasin, some water, and a towel, and for ten minutes he worked with them. Then he discovered a comb, and a broken bit of mirror fixed to the wall of the lean-to, before which he combed his hair and studied his reflection. He noted the unusual flush on his cheeks, but grinned brazenly into the glass.

"I'm sure some flustered," he told his reflection.

Arrayed for a second inspection by Mary Bransford, Sanderson stood for a long time at the door of the lean-to, trying to screw up his courage to the point of confronting the girl.

He succeeded finally, and walked slowly to the outside kitchen door, where he stood, looking in at Mary.

The girl was working over the stove, from which, floating to the doorway where Sanderson stood, came various delicious odors.

Mary was arrayed in a neat-fitting house dress of some soft print material, with a huge apron over it. Her sleeves were rolled slightly above the elbows; her face was flushed, and when she turned and saw Sanderson her eyes grew very bright.

"Oh," she said; "you are up! I was just thinking of calling you!" She ran to him, threw her arms around him, and, in spite of his efforts to evade her, she kissed him first on one cheek and then on the other.

Noting his reluctance she stepped back and looked reprovingly at him.

"You seem so distant, Will. And I am so glad to see you!"

"I ain't used to bein' kissed, I expect."

"But—by your sister!"

He reddened. "I ain't seen you for a long time, you know. Give me time, an' mebbe I'll get used to it."

"I hope so," she smiled. "I should feel lost if I could not kiss my brother. You have washed, too!" she added, noting his glowing face and his freshly combed hair.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Mary!" she corrected.

"Mary," grinned Sanderson.

Mary turned to the stove. "You go out and find a chair on the porch," she directed, over her shoulder. "I'll have supper ready in a jiffy. It's too hot for you in here."

Sanderson obeyed. From the deeply crimson hue of his face it was apparent that the heat of the kitchen had affected him. That, at least, must have been the reason Mary had ordered him away. His face *felt* hot.

He found a chair on the porch, and he sank into it, feeling like a criminal. There was a certain humor in the situation. Sanderson felt it, but could not appreciate it, and he sat, hunched forward, staring glumly into the dusk that had settled over the basin.

He had been sitting on the porch for some minutes when he became aware of a figure near him, and he turned slowly to see the little, anemic man standing not far away.

"Cooling off?" suggested the little man.

Sanderson straightened. "How in hell do you know I'm hot?" he demanded gruffly.

The little man grinned. "There's signs. Your face looks like you'd had it in an oven. Now, don't lose your temper; I didn't mean to offend you."

The little man's voice was placative; his manner gravely ingratiating. Yet Sanderson divined that the other was inwardly laughing at him. Why? Sanderson did not know. He was aware that he must seem awkward in the rôle of brother, and he suspected that the little man had noticed it; possibly the little man was one of those keen-witted and humorously inclined persons who find amusement in the incongruous.

There was certainly humor in the man's face, in the glint of his eyes, and in the curve of his lips. His face was seamed and wrinkled; his ears were big and prominent, the tips bending outward under the brim of a felt hat that was too large for him; his mouth was large, and Sanderson's impression of it was that it could not be closed far enough to conceal all the teeth, but that the lips were continually trying to stretch far enough to accomplish the feat.

Sanderson was certain it was that continual effort of the muscles of the lips that gave to his mouth its humorous expression.

The man was not over five feet and two or three inches tall, and crowning his slender body was a head that was entirely out of proportion to the rest of him. He was not repulsive-looking, however, and a glance at his eyes convinced Sanderson that any-

thing Providence had taken from his body had been added, by way of compensation, to his intellect.

Sanderson found it hard to resent the man's seeming impertinence. He grinned reluctantly at him.

"Did I tell you you'd hurt my feelin's?" he inquired. "What oven do you think I had my head in?"

"I didn't say," grinned the little man. "There's places that are hotter than an oven. And if a man has never been a wolf with women, it might be expected that he'd feel sort of warm to be kissed and fussed over by a sister he's not seen for a good many years. He'd seem like a stranger to her—almost."

Sanderson's eyes glowed with a new interest in the little man.

"How did you know I wasn't a wolf with women?"

"Shucks," said the other; "you're bashful, and you don't run to vanity. Any fool could see that."

"I ain't been introduced to you—regular," said Sanderson, "but you seem to be a heap long on common sense, an' I'd be glad to know you. What did you say your name was?"

"Barney Owen."

"What you doin' at the Double A? You ought to be herd-ridin' scholars in a district schoolhouse."

"Missed my calling," grinned the other. "I got to know too much to teach school, but didn't know enough to let John Barleycorn alone. I'm a drifter, sort of. Been roaming around the north country. Struck the basin about three weeks ago. Miss Bransford was needing men—her father—yours, too, of course—having passed out rather sudden. I was wanting work mighty bad, and Miss Bransford took me on because I was big enough to do the work of half a dozen men."

His face grew grave. Sanderson understood. Miss Bransford had hired Owen out of pity. Sanderson did not answer.

The little man's face worked strangely, and his eyes glowed.

"If you hadn't come when you did, I would have earned my keep, and Alva Dale would be where he wouldn't bother Miss Bransford any more," he said.

Sanderson straightened. "You'd have shot him, you mean?"

Owen did not speak, merely nodding his head.

Sanderson smiled. "Then I'm sort of sorry I come when I did. But do you think shootin' Dale would have ended it?"

"No; Dale has friends." Owen leaned toward Sanderson, his face working with passion. "I hate Dale," he said hoarsely. "I hate him worse than

I hate any snake that I ever saw. I hadn't been here two days when he sneered at me and called me a freak. I'll kill him—some day. Your coming has merely delayed the time. But before he dies I want to see him beaten at this game he's tryin' to work on Miss Bransford. And I'll kill any man that tries to give Miss Bransford the worst of it.

“You've got a fight on your hands. I know Dale and his gang, and they'll make things mighty interesting for you and Miss Bransford. But I'll help you, if you say the word. I'm not much for looks—as you can see—but I can sling a gun with any man I've ever met.

“I'd have tried to fight Dale alone—for Miss Bransford's sake—but I realize that things are against me. I haven't the size, and I haven't the nerve to take the initiative. Besides, I drink. I get riotously drunk. I can't help it. I can't depend on myself. But I can help you, and I will.”

The man's earnestness was genuine, and though Sanderson had little confidence in the other's ability to take a large part in what was to come, he respected the spirit that had prompted the offer. So he reached out and took the man's hand.

“Any man that feels as strongly as you do can do a heap—at anything,” he said. “We'll call it a deal. But you're under my orders.”

"Yes," returned Owen, gripping the hand held out to him.

"Will!" came Mary's voice from the kitchen, "supper is ready!"

Owen laughed lowly, dropped Sanderson's hand, and slipped away into the growing darkness.

Sanderson got up and faced the kitchen door, hesitating, reluctant again to face the girl and to continue the deception. Necessity drove him to the door, however, and when he reached it, he saw Mary standing near the center of the kitchen, waiting for him.

"I don't believe you are hungry at all!" she declared, looking keenly at him. "And do you know, I think you blush more easily than any man I ever saw. But don't let that bother you," she added, laughing; "blushes become you. Will," she went on, tenderly pressing his arm as she led him through a door into the dining-room, "you are awfully good-looking!"

"You'll have me gettin' a swelled head if you go to talkin' like that," he said, without looking at her.

"Oh, no; you couldn't be vain if you tried. None of the Bransfords were ever vain—or conceited. But they all have had good appetites," she told him, shaking a finger at him. "And if you don't

eat heartily I shall believe your long absence from home has taken some of the Bransford out of you!"

She pulled a chair out for him, and took another at the table opposite him.

Sanderson ate; there was no way out of it, though he felt awkward and uncomfortable. He kept wondering what she would say to him if she knew the truth. It seemed to him that had the girl looked closely at him she might have seen the guilt in his eyes.

But apparently she was not thinking of doubting him—it was that knowledge which made Sanderson realize how contemptible was the part he was playing. She had accepted him on trust, without question, with the implicit and matter-of-fact faith of a child.

He listened in silence while she told him many things about the Bransfords—incidents that had occurred during his supposed absence, intimate little happenings that he had no right to hear. And he sat, silently eating, unable to interrupt, feeling more guilty and despicable all the time.

But he broke in after a time, gruffly:

"What's the trouble between Dale and the Nylands?"

Instantly she stiffened. "I forgot to tell you about that. Ben Nyland is a nester. He has a

quarter-section of land on the northwestern edge of the basin. But he hasn't proved on it. The land adjoins Dale's. Dale wants it—he has always wanted it. And he means to have it. He also wants Peggy Nyland.

“Dale is a beast! You heard Peggy tell how he has hounded her. It is true; she has told me about it more than once. Dale hasn't told, of course; but it is my opinion that Dale put the Double A cattle into Ben's corral so that he could hang Ben. With Ben out of the way he could take the Nyland property—and Peggy, too.”

“Why did he use Double A cattle?”

Mary paled. “Don't you see the hideous humor of that? He knows Peggy Nyland and I are friends. Dale is ruthless and subtle. Can't you understand how a man of that type would enjoy seeing me send my friend's brother to his death—and the brother innocent?”

“Why didn't you tell Dale the cattle did not belong to you?”

Mary smiled faintly. “I couldn't. To do so would have involved Ben Nyland in more trouble. Dale would have got one of his friends to claim them. And then I could have done nothing—having disclaimed the ownership of the stock. And I—I couldn't lie. And, besides, I kept hoping that something would

happen. I had a premonition that something *would* happen. And something did happen—you came!”

“Yes,” said Sanderson inanely, “I came.”

He drew a large red handkerchief from a pocket and mopped some huge beads of sweat from his face and forehead. When the handkerchief came out a sheet of paper, folded and crumpled, fluttered toward the floor, describing an eccentric circle and landing within a foot of Mary’s feet.

The girl saw that Sanderson had not noticed the loss of the paper, and she stooped and recovered it. She held it in a hand while Sanderson continued to wipe the perspiration from his face, and noting that he was busily engaged she smoothed the paper on the table in front of her and peered mischievously at it. And then, her curiosity conquering her, she read, for the writing on the paper was strangely familiar.

Sanderson having restored the handkerchief to its pocket, noticed Mary’s start, and saw her look at him, her eyes wide and perplexed.

“Why, Will, where did you get this?” she inquired, sitting very erect.

“Mebbe if you’d tell me what it is I could help you out,” he grinned.

“Why, it’s a letter father wrote to a man in Tombstone, Arizona. See here! Father’s name is

signed to it! I saw father write it. Why, I rode over to Dry Bottom and mailed it! This man had written to father a long time before, asking for a job. I have his letter somewhere. It was the oddest letter! It was positively a gem of formality. I can remember every word of it, for I must have read it a dozen times. It ran:

DEAR SIR:

The undersigned has been at the location noted below for a term of years and desires to make a change. If you have an opening for a good all-around man, the undersigned would be willing to work for you. If you would want a recommendation, you can address Amos Burroughs, of the Pig-Pen Ranch, near Tombstone, where the undersigned is employed.

Yours truly,

DEAL SANDERSON.

Mary leaned forward in her chair and looked at Sanderson with eager, questioning eyes. Sanderson stared vacantly back at her.

She held the letter up to him. "This is father's answer, telling the man to come on. How on earth did you get hold of it?"

Sanderson had slumped down in his chair. He saw discovery and disgrace in prospect. In the total stoppage of his thoughts no way of escape or evasion suggested itself. At the outset he was to be exposed as a miserable impostor.

He groaned, grinned vacuously at Mary, and again

produced the handkerchief, wiping away drops of perspiration that were twice as big as those he had previously mopped off.

Mary continued to stare at him, repeating the question: "How did you get it?"

Sanderson's composure began to return; his grin grew wider and more intelligent, and at the sixth repetition of Mary's question he answered, boldly:

"I wasn't goin' to tell you about that. You see, ma'am——"

"Mary!"

"You see, Mary, I was goin' to fool Brans—dad. I wrote, askin' him for the job, an' I was intendin' to come on, to surprise him. But before I told him who I was, I was goin' to feel him out, an' find out what he thought of me. Then I got your letter, tellin' me he was dead, an' so there wasn't any more use of tryin' to fool him."

"But that name, 'Sanderson?' That isn't your name, Will!"

"It was," he grinned. "When I left home I didn't want anybody to be runnin' into me an' recognizin' me, so I changed it to Sanderson. Deal Sanderson."

The girl's expression changed to delight; she sat erect and clapped her hands.

"Oh," she said, "I wish father was here to listen

to this! He thought all along that you were going to turn out bad. If he only knew! Will, you don't mean to tell me that you are the Sanderson that we all know of here—that nearly everybody in the country has heard about; the man who is called 'Square Deal' Sanderson by all his friends—and even by his enemies—because of his determination to do right—and to make everyone else do right too!"

Again Sanderson resorted to the handkerchief.

"I don't reckon they've talked about me that strong," he said.

"But they have! Oh, I'm so happy, Will. Why, when Dale hears about it he'll be positively venomous—and scared. I don't think he will bother the Double A again—after he hears of it!"

But Sanderson merely smirked mirthlessly; he saw no reason for being joyful over the lie he had told. He was getting deeper and deeper into the mire of deceit and prevarication, and there seemed to be no escape.

And now, when he had committed himself, he realized that he might have evaded it all, this last lie at least, by telling Mary that he had picked the note up on the desert, or anywhere, for that matter, and she would have been forced to believe him.

He kept her away from him, fending off her ca-

resses with a pretense of slight indisposition until suddenly panic-stricken over insistence, he told her he was going to bed, bolted into the room, locked the door behind him, and sat long in the darkness and the heat, filling the room with a profane appreciation of himself as a double-dyed fool who could not even lie intelligently.

CHAPTER VII

KISSES—A MAN REFUSES THEM

THERE was a kerosene lamp in Sanderson's room, and when, after an hour of gloomy silence in the dark, he got up and lit the lamp, he felt decidedly better. He was undressing, preparing to get into bed, when he was assailed with a thought that brought the perspiration out on him again.

This time it was a cold sweat, and it came with the realization that discovery was again imminent, for if, as Mary had said, she had kept Sanderson's letter to her father, there were in existence two letters—his own and Will Bransford's—inevitably in different handwriting, both of which he had claimed to have written.

Sanderson groaned. The more he lied the deeper he became entangled. He pulled on his trousers, and stood shoeless, gazing desperately around the room.

He simply must destroy that letter, or Mary, comparing it with the letter her brother had written, would discover the deception.

It was the first time in Sanderson's life that he

had ever attempted to deceive anybody, and he was in the grip of a cringing dread.

For the first time since he occupied the room he inspected it, noting its furnishings. His heart thumped wildly with hope while he looked.

It was a woman's room—Mary's, of course. For there were decorations here and there—a delicate piece of crochet work on a dresser; a sewing basket on a stand; a pincushion, a pair of shears; some gaily ornamented pictures on the walls, and—peering behind the dresser—he saw a pair of lady's riding-boots.

He strode to a closet door and threw it open, revealing, hanging innocently on their hooks, a miscellaneous array of skirts, blouses, and dresses.

Mary had surrendered her room to him. Feeling guilty again, and rather conscience-stricken, as though he were committing some sacrilegious action, he went to the dresser and began to search among the effects in the drawers.

They were filled with articles of wearing apparel, delicately fringed things that delight the feminine heart, and keepsakes of all descriptions. Sanderson handled them carefully, but his search was not the less thorough on that account.

And at last, in one of the upper drawers of the dresser, he came upon a packet of letters.

Again his conscience pricked him, but the stern urge of necessity drove him on until he discovered an envelope addressed to the elder Bransford, in his own handwriting, and close to it a letter from Will Bransford to Mary Bransford.

Sanderson looked long at the Bransford letter, considering the situation. He was tempted to destroy that, too, but he reflected, permitting a sentimental thought to deter him.

For Mary undoubtedly treasured that letter, and when the day came that he should tell her the truth, the letter would be the only link that would connect her with the memory of her brother.

Sanderson could not destroy it. He had already offended Mary Bransford more than he had a right to, and to destroy her brother's letter would be positively heinous.

Besides, unknown to him, there might be more letters about with Will Bransford's signature on them, and it might be well to preserve this particular letter in case he should be called upon to forge Will Bransford's signature.

So he retied the letters in the packet and restored the packet to its place, retaining his own letter to Bransford. Smiling grimly now, he again sought the chair near the window, lit a match, applied the blaze to the letter, and watched the paper burn until

nothing remained of it but a crinkly ash. Then he smoked a cigarette and got into bed, feeling more secure.

Determined not to submit to any more of Mary's caresses, and feeling infinitely small and mean over the realization that he had already permitted her to carry her affection too far, he frowned at her when he went into the kitchen after washing the next morning, gruffly replying when she wished him a cheery, "Good morning," and grasping her arms when she attempted to kiss him.

He blushed, though, when her eyes reproached him.

"I ain't used to bein' mushed over," he told her. "We'll get along a heap better if you cut out the kissin'."

"Why, Will!" she said, her lips trembling.

She set them though, instantly, and went about her duties, leaving Sanderson to stand in the center of the room feeling like a brute.

They breakfasted in silence—almost. Sanderson saw her watching him—covert glances that held not a little wonder and disappointment. And then, when the meal was nearly finished, she looked at him with a taunting half-smile.

"Didn't you sleep good, Will?"

Sanderson looked fairly at her. That "Will"

was already an irritation to him, for it continually reminded him of the despicable part he was playing. He knew what he was going to say would hurt her, but he was determined to erect between them a barrier that would prevent a repetition of any demonstrations of affection of the brother and sister variety.

He didn't want to let her continue to show affection for him when he knew that, if she knew who he really was, she would feel more like murdering him.

"Look here, Mary," he said, coldly, "I've never cared a heap for the name Bransford. That's why I changed my name to Sanderson. I never liked to be called 'Will.' Hereafter I want you to call me Sanderson—Deal Sanderson. Then mebbe I'll feel more like myself."

She did not answer, but her lips straightened and she sat very rigid. It was plain to him that she was very much disappointed in him, and that in her mind was the contrast between her brother of today and her brother of yesterday.

She got up after a time, holding her head high, and left the room, saying as she went out:

"Very well; your wishes shall be respected. But it seems to me that the name Bransford is one to be proud of!"

Sanderson grinned into his plate. He felt more decent now than he had felt since arriving at the Double A. If he could continue to prevent her from showing any affection for him—visible, at least—he would feel that the deception he was practising was less criminal. And when he went away, after settling the differences between Mary Bransford and Dale, he would have less to reproach himself with.

He did not see Mary again that morning. Leaving the dining-room, he went outside, finding Barney Owen in the bunkhouse in the company of several other Double A men.

Owen introduced him to the other men—who had ridden in to the ranchhouse the previous night, and were getting ready to follow the outfit wagon down the river into the basin to where the Double A herd was grazing.

Sanderson watched the men ride away, then he turned to Owen.

“I’m ridin’ to Las Vegas, to get a look at the will, an’ see what the records have got to say about the title to the Double A. Want to go?”

“Sure,” the little man grinned.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PLOTTERS

RIDING down the gentle slope of the basin, Alva Dale maintained a sullen silence. He rode far in advance of the two men who accompanied him, not listening to their voices, which occasionally reached him, not seeming to be aware of their presence.

Defeat had always brought bitterness to Dale; his eyes were glowing with a futile rage as he led his men homeward.

Dale's scheme to dispose of Ben Nyland had been carefully planned and deftly carried out. He had meant to hang Nyland, take possession of his property, and force Peggy to accept whatever conditions he cared to impose upon her.

The unlooked-for appearance of Mary Bransford's brother had disturbed his plans. As a matter of fact, the coming of Bill Bransford would make it necessary for Dale to make entirely new plans.

Dale was puzzled. During the elder Bransford's last days, and for a year or more preceding the day of Bransford's death, Dale had professed friendship

for him. The pretense of friendship had resulted profitably for Dale, for it had enabled him to establish an intimacy with Bransford which had made it possible for Dale to learn much of Bransford's personal affairs.

For instance, Dale had discovered that there was in Las Vegas no record of Mary Bransford's birth, and though Bransford had assured him that Mary was his child, the knowledge had served to provide Dale with a weapon which he might have used to advantage — had not Bill Bransford returned in time to defeat him.

Dale had heard the story of the trouble between Bransford and his son, Will; it was the old tale of father and son not agreeing, and of the son leaving home, aggrieved.

Dale had made it his business to inquire often about the son, and when one day Bransford told him he had received a letter from his boy, Dale betrayed such interest that the elder Bransford had permitted him to read the letter.

That had been about a year before Mary had written the letter that Sanderson had found in one of Will Bransford's pockets. The letter told of the writer's longing to return home. The elder Bransford declared that his heart had not softened toward the boy and that he would not answer him. Leaving

Dale, Bransford had dropped the letter, and Dale had picked it up.

Dale still had the letter, and because of his pretended friendship for the father he had been able to insinuate himself into Mary's good graces. He had advised Mary to write to her brother, and he had seen the letter from the younger Bransford in which the latter had told his sister that he would return.

After reading Will Bransford's letter, and learning from Mary that she was sending a thousand dollars to her brother, Dale wrote to a friend in Tucson. Dale's letter accompanied Mary's to the latter town, and the evil-visaged fellow who received it grinned widely in explaining the circumstance to two of his friends.

"We'll git him, sure as shootin'," he said. "A thousand dollars ain't a hell of a lot—but I've put men out of business for less!"

Dale knew the man to whom he had written, and he had received a reply, telling him that the job would be done. And that was why, when Sanderson had calmly announced that he was Will Bransford, Dale had been unwilling to believe his statement.

Dale did not believe, now, that the man who had interfered to save Nyland was Will Bransford. Dale rode slowly homeward, scowling, inwardly fuming

with rage, but unable to form any decided plan of action.

It was several miles to the Bar D, Dale's ranch, and when he arrived there he was in an ugly mood. He curtly dismissed the two men who had accompanied him and went into the house. Opening the door of the room he used as an office, he saw a medium-sized man of fifty sitting in a big desk chair, smoking a cigar.

The man smiled at Dale's surprise, but did not offer to get up, merely extending his right hand, which Dale grasped and shook heartily.

"Dave Silverthorn, or I'm a ghost!" ejaculated Dale, grinning. "How in thunder did you get here?"

"Rode," smiled the other, showing a set of white, flashing teeth. "I saw you pass the window. You looked rather glum, and couldn't see my horse, I suppose. Something gone wrong?"

"Everything," grunted Dale; "that confounded young Bransford has showed up!"

The smile left the other's face. His eyes glowed and the corners of his mouth took on a cruel droop.

"He has, eh?" he said, slowly. His voice was expressionless. "So that lead has petered out."

He puffed slowly at his cigar, studying Dale's face, while the latter related what had occurred.

“ So Nyland is still at large, eh? ” he remarked, when Dale had finished. “ Why not set a gunman on him? ”

Dale scowled. “ There ain’t a gunman in this section that would take a chance on Nyland—he’s lightning! ” Dale cursed. “ Besides, there ain’t no use in goin’ after Nyland’s place unless we can get the Double A. ”

“ Then there wasn’t any use of going after it yesterday, or today, as you did, ” said the other. “ Unless, ” he added, looking intently at Dale, “ the sister has been on your mind some. ”

Dale reddened.

“ I don’t mind admittin’ she is, ” he grinned

“ Look out, Dale, ” warned the other; “ there’s danger there. Many a big project has been ruined by men dragging a woman into it. You have no right to jeopardize this thing with a love affair. Peggy Nyland is desirable to a man of your intense passion, I suppose; but this project is bigger than any woman’s love! ”

“ Bah! ” sneered Dale. “ I can ’tend to her without losin’ sight of the main object. ”

“ All right, then, ” laughed the other. “ The success of this thing depends largely on you. We can’t do a thing with the Legislature; these sagebrush fools are adamant on the question of water-rights.

They won't restrict an owner's right and title to possession of all the water on his land.

"And he can dam the stream as much as he pleases, providing he don't cut down the supply that normally flows to his neighbors; and the gorge doesn't supply any water to the basin, so that Bransford would be justified in directing the gorge stream.

"In other words, old Bransford's title to the land that the gorge runs through is unassailable. There is only one way to get at him, and that is in some way to get possession of the title."

"That's tied up tighter than blazes," said Dale. "Record and all are clear. An' there ain't no judge we can get at. But if young Bransford hadn't come——"

"Yes," smiled Silverthorn. "It's too bad. We had a man, ready to come on at the word, to impersonate young Bransford. He would have stayed here long enough to get a clear title to the Double A, and then he would have turned it over to us for a consideration. It rather looks as though we are stumped, eh?"

Dale frowned. Then he got up, went to a drawer in the desk before which Silverthorn sat, and drew out a letter—the letter young Bransford had written to his father about a year before.

"We've still got a chance," he told Silverthorn.

And then he told the latter of his suspicions about Sanderson.

Silverthorn's eyes gleamed. "That's possible," he said, "but how are you going to prove it?"

"There's a way," returned Dale. He went to the door, and shouted the names of two men, standing in the doorway until they came—the two men who had accompanied him that morning. He spoke to them, briefly:

"You're ridin' straight to Tucson as fast as your cayuses can take you. You ought to make it in a week. I'll give you that long. Find Gary Miller. Tell him I sent you, an' find out what he knows about young Bill Bransford. Then hit the breeze back. If it takes you more than two weeks I'll knock your damned heads off!"

CHAPTER IX

THE LITTLE MAN TALKS

MARY BRANSFORD spent the first day of Sanderson's absence in the isolation of the parlor, with the shades drawn, crying. Her brother had bitterly disappointed her.

He had sent word by one of the men that he was going to Las Vegas to look up the title to the property. She thought he might at least have brought her the message personally.

Mary told herself that she had not been unduly demonstrative, as Sanderson had intimated by his actions. She had merely been glad to see him, as any sister would be glad to see a brother whom she had not seen for many years; and she assured herself that if he loved her as she loved him he would not have resented her display of affection.

That affection, though, troubled Mary. To be sure, she had never had a brother about, to fuss over, and therefore she could not tell just how deeply she should be expected to love the one whom Providence had given her; but she was certain that she did not love him too much.

For Sanderson was worthy of the full measure of any sister's love. Big, handsome, vigorous, with a way about him that any woman must admire, Mary felt he deserved all the affection she could bestow.

Her wonder and perplexity came over a contemplation of the quality of that love. Was it right that she should thrill so delightfully whenever he came near her? And was it entirely proper for her to feel that queer tingle of delight over the strangeness of it all?

And did that strangeness result from the fact that she had not seen him for years; or was there some truth in Dale's assertion that she was merely an adopted daughter, and her love for Sanderson not merely the love of a sister for a brother, but the love of a woman for a man?

Had Sanderson taken that view of it? She thought he had; for she had told him about Dale's assertion, and his constraint had begun shortly after.

She did not blame him a great deal—after she had thought it over. He had done the manly thing, she divined, in not taking advantage of the situation, and she believed she loved him more than ever because of his attitude. But she felt that she had lost something, and the second day had gone before she succeeded in resigning herself to the new state of affairs.

Nothing happened. Dale did not come near the ranchhouse. Mary rode over to the Nyland ranch and had a long talk with Peggy, and Peggy told her that she had not seen Dale.

Ben Nyland had driven the Double A cattle over to their own range, and so far as he was concerned the incident with Dale was closed. But, Peggy told Mary, Ben was bitterly resentful, and had sworn that if Dale bothered Peggy any more he would kill him.

Mary, however, was not greatly interested in Peggy's recital. She sat on a chair in the kitchen of the Nyland cabin, listening to Peggy, but making no replies. And it was not until she was ready to go that Mary revealed the real reason for her visit—and then she did not reveal it to Peggy, but to her own heart.

For she reddened when she asked the question:

"I wonder if you feel about Ben as I feel about *my* brother—that when you kiss him you are kissing a strange man?"

Peggy laughed. "You would feel that way, of course. For your brother is almost a stranger to you."

"And do you kiss Ben often?" asked Mary.

"Ben doesn't like it," smiled Peggy. "He is like most other men—he likes to kiss the daughters of

other men, but he gets sulky and balky when I want to kiss him. So I don't try very often. Your brother is a fine, big fellow, but you will find before you have been around him very long that he wants to do his kissing away from home."

Mary laughed, and blushed again. "I have already discovered that," she said. "But, Peggy," she added seriously, "I love him so much that I believe I should be jealous if I thought he kissed another girl!"

Mary rode homeward, rather comforted over her visit. And during the remaining days of Sanderson's absence she succeeded in convincing herself that Sanderson's attitude toward her was the usual attitude of brothers toward sisters, and that she had nothing of which to complain.

On the seventh day Sanderson and Owen returned.

Mary saw them ride in and she ran to the door and waved a hand to them. Owen flourished his hat at her, but Sanderson only grinned.

When Sanderson came in Mary did not attempt to kiss him, but she wanted to when he seized her hand and squeezed it warmly. For it seemed to her that he was troubled over something.

She watched him narrowly for signs that would tell her of the nature of the trouble, but when he went to bed she had learned nothing.

At breakfast the next morning she asked him what he had discovered at Las Vegas. He looked straight at her.

“There is no record of your birth,” he said.

She paled. “Then Dale has grounds for his suspicion,” she said in a weak voice.

“Because your birth was not recorded is no sign you are not a Bransford,” he said. “I’ll tell you this,” he added gruffly: “as a sister you suit me from the ground up; an’ I’ll stick to you until hell freezes over!”

Not until that instant did she realize that she had entertained a fear that Sanderson would believe as Dale believed, and in an excess of joy over the discovery that he did believe in her she got up, ran around the table, seized Sanderson by the shoulders and laid her cheek against his.

“You’re a dear,” she said, “and I don’t care whether you like it or not, I am going to kiss you!”

“Just once,” he said, blushing.

She kissed him, and then leaned back, looking at him reprovingly.

“You haven’t returned a kiss I have given you!” she said. “And I want you to!”

“All right,” he agreed, and this time the warmth of his response made her draw a long, deep breath.

Sanderson made his escape as soon as he decently

could, and walked to a corner of the pasture fence, where he stood, one arm resting on the top rail, his gaze on the basin.

At the court in Las Vegas he had discovered that Bransford had made a will, bequeathing the ranch to his son. The document had been recorded only a few months before Bransford died, showing that he had at last forgiven the boy.

Sanderson had intended to take possession of the ranch, in an effort to forestall any scheme Dale might have, and while in Las Vegas he had applied to the court for permission to have the title transferred. And then he had been told it would be necessary for him to file an affidavit and proof establishing his identity.

With Barney Owen looking on Sanderson was compelled to defer signing the affidavit, for Sanderson remembered the letter from young Bransford, bearing the younger Bransford's signature. The letter was still in the dresser drawer in his room, and he would have to have it beside him while he signed Bransford's name to the affidavit in order to imitate Bransford's handwriting successfully. Therefore he asked permission to take the affidavit home.

Pocketing the paper, after receiving the necessary permission, Sanderson caught Owen looking at him with a smile. He scowled at the little man.

"What's eatin' you?" he demanded.

"Curiosity," said the other. "Don't tell me you're too bashful to sign your name in public."

They were mounting their horses when the little man spoke, and Sanderson grinned coldly at him.

"You're a whole lot longer on talk than I like any of my friends to be," he said.

"Then I'll cut out gassing promiscuous," grinned the latter.

Sanderson was troubled over the situation. To successfully keep Dale from attacking his title to the ranch he must sign the affidavit and return it to the court. He must imitate Will Bransford's signature to prevent Mary Bransford from suspecting the deception—for at any time she might decide to go to Las Vegas to look over the records there.

More, he must practice writing Bransford's signature until he could imitate it without having to look at the original.

Determined to go to work at the deception instantly, Sanderson returned to the ranchhouse, slipped into his room and locked the door, opened the drawer and took out the package of letters.

The Bransford letter was missing! Half a dozen times he thumbed the letters in the packages over before he would admit that the one for which he was seeking was not there.

He stood for a time looking at the package of letters, bitterly accusing himself. It was his own fault if the whole structure of deception tumbled about his ears, for he should have taken the letter when he had had an opportunity.

Mary Bransford had it, of course. The other letters, he supposed, she cared less for than the one written by her brother.

For the twentieth time since his arrival at the ranch, Sanderson had an impulse to ride away and leave Mary Bransford to fight the thing out herself. But, as before, he fought down the impulse.

This time — so imbued was he with determination to heap confusion upon Alva Dale's head — he stood in the center of the room, grinning saturninely, fully resolved that if it must be he would make a complete confession to the girl and stay at the Double A to fight Dale no matter what Mary thought of him.

He might have gone to Mary, to ask her what had become of the letter. He could have invented some pretext. But he would not; he would not have her think he had been examining her letters. One thing he could do without confessing that he had been prying — and he did it.

At dinner he remarked casually to Mary:

“ I reckon you don't think enough of my letters to put them away as keepsakes? ”

“Sanderson’s or Bransford’s?” she returned, looking at him with a smile.

“Both,” he grinned.

“Well,” she said, “I did keep both. But, as I told you before, I had the Sanderson letter somewhere. I have been looking for it, but have not been able to find it.”

Sanderson grinned faintly and wondered what she would say if she knew what care he had taken to burn the Sanderson letter.

“The letter you wrote as yourself—the Bransford letter—I have. It was among a lot of others in the drawer of the dresser in your room. I was looking them over while you were gone, and I took it.”

Sanderson had a hard time to keep the eagerness out of his voice, but he did so:

“You got it handy?”

She looked straight at him. “That is the oddest thing,” she said seriously. “I took it from there to keep it safe, and I have mislaid it again, for I can’t find it anywhere.”

There was no guile in her eyes—Sanderson was certain of that. And he hoped the letter would stay mislaid. He grinned.

“Well, I was only curious,” he said. “Don’t bother to look for it.”

He felt better when he went out of the house and walked toward the corral fence. He felt more secure and capable. Beginning with the following day, he meant to take charge of the ranch and run it as he knew it should be run.

He had not been at the Double A long, but he had seen signs of shiftlessness here and there. He had no doubt that since Bransford's death the men had taken advantage of the absence of authority to relax, and the ranch had suffered. He would soon bring them back to a state of efficiency.

He heard a step behind him, and looking over his shoulder he saw the little man approaching.

The little man joined Sanderson, not speaking as he climbed the fence at a point near by and sat on the top rail, idly swinging his legs.

Sanderson had conceived a liking for Owen. There was something about the little man that invited it. He was little, and manly despite his bodily defects. But there was a suggestion of effeminacy mingling with the manliness of him that aroused the protective instinct in Sanderson.

In a big man the suggestion of effeminacy would have been disgusting, and Sanderson's first action as owner of the ranch would have been to discharge such a man instantly. But in Sanderson's heart had come a spirit of tolerance toward the little man, for

he felt that the effeminacy had resulted from his afflictions.

He was a querulous semi-invalid, trying bravely to imitate his vigorous and healthy friends.

"Thinking it over?" he queried, looking down at Sanderson.

"Thinkin' what over?"

"Well, just things," grinned the little man. "For one thing, I suppose you are trying to decide why you didn't sign your name—over in Las Vegas."

Sanderson grinned mildly, but did not answer. He felt more at ease now, and the little man's impertinences did not bother him so much as formerly. He looked up, however, startled, when Owen said slowly:

"Do you want me to tell you why you didn't sign Will Bransford's name to the affidavit?"

Sanderson's eyes did not waver as they met Owen's.

"Tell me," he said evenly.

"Because you are not Will Bransford," said the little man.

Sanderson did not move; nor did he remove his gaze from the face of the little man. He was not conscious of any emotion whatever. For now that he had determined to stay at the Double A no matter what happened, discovery did not alarm him. He grinned at the little man, deliberately, with a taunt-

ing smile that the other could not fail to understand.

“ You’re a wise guy, eh? ” he said. “ Well, spring it. I’m anxious to know how you got next to me.”

“ You ain’t sore, then? ”

“ Not, none.”

“ I was hoping you wouldn’t be,” eagerly said the little man, “ for I don’t want you to hit the breeze just now. I know you are not Will Bransford because I know Bransford intimately. I was his chum for several years. He could drink as much as I. He was lazy and shiftless, but I liked him. We were together in Tucson — and in other places in Arizona. Texas, too. We never amounted to much. Do you need to know any more? I can tell you.”

“ Tell me what? ”

“ More,” grinned the other man, “ about yourself. You are Sanderson — Deal Sanderson — nicknamed Square Deal Sanderson. I saw you one day in Tombstone; you were pointed out to me, and the minute I laid my eyes on you the day Dale tried to hang Nyland, I knew you.”

Sanderson smiled. “ Why didn’t you tell Mary? ”

The little man’s face grew grave. “ Because I didn’t want to queer your game. You saved Nyland — an innocent man. Knowing your reputation for fairness, I was convinced that you didn’t come here to deceive anybody.”

"But I did deceive somebody," said Sanderson. "Not you, accordin' to what you've been tellin' me, but Mary Bransford. She thinks I am her brother, an' I've let her go on thinkin' it."

"Why?" asked the little man.

Sanderson gravely appraised the other. "There ain't no use of holdin' out anything on you," he said. His lips straightened and his eyes bored into the little man's. There was a light in his own that made the little man stiffen. And Sanderson's voice was cold and earnest.

"I'm puttin' you wise to why I've not told her," he went on. "But if you ever open your yap far enough to whisper a word of it to her I'm wringin' your neck, *pronto!* That goes!"

He told Owen the story from the beginning—about the Drifter, his letter to the elder Bransford, how he had killed the two men who had murdered Will Bransford, and how, on the impulse of the moment, he had impersonated Mary's brother.

"What are you figuring to do now?" questioned the little man when Sanderson finished.

"I'm tellin' her right now," declared Sanderson. "She'll salivate me, most likely, for me lettin' her kiss me an' fuss over me. But I ain't carin' a heap. I ain't never been no hand at deceivin' no one—I ain't foxy enough. There's been times since I've

been here when I've been scared to open my mouth for fear my damned heart would jump out. I reckon she'll just naturally kill me when she finds it out, but I don't seem to care a heap whether she does or not."

The little man narrowed his eyes at Sanderson.

"You're deeply in love with her, I suppose?"

Sanderson flushed; then his gaze grew steady and cold. "Up till now you've minded your own business," he said. "If you'll keep on mindin' it, we'll——"

"Of course," grinned Owen. "You couldn't help loving her—I love her, too. You say you're going to tell her. Don't do it. Why should you? Don't you see that if you told her that her brother had been murdered she'd never get over it? She's that kind. And you know what Dale's scheme was, don't you? Has she told you?" At Sanderson's nod, Owen went on:

"If you were to let it be known that you are not Will Bransford, Dale would get the property as sure as shooting. I know his plan. I overheard him and a man named Dave Silverthorn talking it over one night when I was prowling around Dale's house. The window of Dale's office was wide open, and I was crouching outside.

"They've got a man ready to come on here to

impersonate Bransford. They would prove his claim and after he was established he would sell out to them. They have forged papers showing that Mary is an adopted daughter—though not legally. Don't you see that if you don't go on letting everybody think you are Bransford, Mary will lose the ranch? "

Sanderson shook his head. "I'd be gettin' deeper an' deeper into it all the time—in love an' in trouble. An' when she'd find out how I'd fooled her all the time she'd hate me."

"Not if you save the ranch for her," argued the little man. "She'd feel badly about her brother, maybe, but she'd forgive you if you stayed and beat Dale at his own game."

Sanderson did not answer. The little man climbed down from the fence and moved close to him, talking earnestly, and at last Sanderson grinned down at him.

"I'm doing it," he said. "I'll stay. I reckon I was figurin' on it all the time."

CHAPTER X

PLAIN TALK

BARNEY OWEN had told Sanderson of his hatred for Alva Dale, but he had not told Sanderson many other things. He had not told the true story of how he came to be employed at the Double A — how Mary had come upon him one day at a shallow crossing of the river, far down in the basin.

Owen was flat on his stomach at the edge of the water, scooping it up with eager handfuls to quench a thirst that had endured for days. He had been so weak that he could not stand when she found him, and in some way she got him on his horse and brought him to the ranchhouse, there to nurse him until he recovered his strength.

It had been while she was caring for him that she had told him about her fear of Dale, and thereafter — as soon as he was able to ride again — Owen took it upon himself to watch Dale.

In spite of his exceeding slenderness, Owen seemed to possess the endurance and stamina of a larger and more physically perfect man. For though he was always seen about the ranchhouse during the

day—helping at odd jobs and appearing to be busy nearly all the time—each succeeding night found him stealthily mounting his horse to ride to the Bar D, there to watch Dale's movements.

He had not been at the Bar D since the night before the day on which he had left with Sanderson to go to Las Vegas, but on the second night following his return—soon after dark—he went to the stable, threw saddle and bridle on his horse, and vanished into the shadows of the basin.

Later, moving carefully, he appeared at the edge of a tree clump near the Bar D corral. He saw a light in one of the windows of the house—Dale's office—and he left his horse in the shadows and stole forward. There were two men in the office with Dale. Owen saw them and heard their voices as he crept to a point under the window in the dense blackness of the night.

The men Dale had sent to Tucson had not required the full two weeks for the trip; they had made it in ten days, and their faces, as they sat before Dale in the office, showed the effects of their haste. Yet they grinned at Dale as they talked, glowing with pride over their achievement, but the word they brought to Dale did not please him, and he sat glaring at them until they finished.

“ Gary Miller ain’t been heard of for a month, eh? ” he said. “ You say you heard he started this way? Then where in hell is he? ”

Neither of the men could answer that question and Dale dismissed them. Then he walked to a door, opened it, and called to someone in another room. Dave Silverthorn entered the office, and for more than an hour the two talked, their conversation being punctuated with futile queries and profanity.

At ten o’clock the next morning Dale appeared at the Double A ranchhouse. Apparently he was willing to forgive and forget, for he grinned at Owen, who was watching him from the door of the bunkhouse, and he politely doffed his hat to Mary Bransford, who met him at the door of the ranchhouse.

“ Well, Miss Mary,” he said, “ how does it feel to have a brother again? ”

“ It’s rather satisfying, Dale,” smiled the girl. “ Won’t you get off your horse? ”

The girl’s lips were stiff with dread anticipation and dislike. Dale’s manner did not mislead her; his forced geniality, his gruff heartiness, his huge smile, were all insincere, masking evil. He seemed to her like a big, tawny, grinning beast, and her heart thumped with trepidation as she looked at him.

“ How’s Nyland? ” he asked, smiling hugely. “ That was a narrow squeak—now, wasn’t it? For

I found that Ben Nyland didn't brand them cattle at all—it was another man, living down the basin. That nester near Colby's. He done it. But he sloped before we could get a rope on him. Had a grudge against Nyland, I reckon. Sorry it happened."

Thus he attempted to smooth the matter over. But he saw that Mary did not believe him, and his grin grew broader.

"Where's brother Will this mornin', Mary?" he said.

Sanderson appeared in the doorway behind Mary.

"You could see him if you was half lookin'," he said slowly.

"So I could," guffawed Dale. "But if there's a pretty girl around——"

"You come here on business, Dale?" interrupted Sanderson. "Because if you did," he went on before Dale could answer, "I'd be glad to get it over."

"Meanin' that you don't want me to be hangin' around here no longer than is necessary, eh?" said Dale.

"You've said a heap," drawled Sanderson.

"Well, it won't take a long time," Dale returned. "It's just this. I've got word from Las Vegas that you've swore to an affidavit sayin' that you're Will Bransford. That's all right—I ain't got nothin' to say about that. But there's a law about brands.

“Your dad registered his brand—the Double A. But that don’t let you out. Accordin’ to the law you’ve got to do your registerin’ same as though the brand had never been registered before. Bein’ the only law around here—me bein’ a deputy sheriff—I’ve got to look out for that end of it.

“An’ so, if you’ll just sign this here blank, with your name and address, specifyin’ your brand, why, we’ll call it all settled.”

And he held out a legal-looking paper toward Sanderson.

Sanderson’s lips straightened, for as his eyes met Dale’s he saw the latter’s glint with a cold cunning. For an instant Sanderson meditated, refusing to accept the paper, divining that Dale was concealing his real purpose; but glancing sidewise he caught a swift wink from Owen, who had drawn near and was standing beside a porch column. And he saw Owen distinctly jerk his head toward the house.

Sanderson stepped forward and took the paper from Dale’s hand. Then he abruptly strode toward the house, telling Dale to wait.

Sanderson halted in the middle of the sitting-room as Owen entered the room through a rear door. Barney Owen was grinning.

“Wants your signature, does he?” said Owen. He whispered rapidly to Sanderson, and the latter’s

face grew pale and grim as he listened. When Owen had finished he grinned.

“Now we’ll give him Will Bransford’s signature—just as he used to write it. I’ve seen it more times than any other man ever saw it, and I can duplicate it to a flourish. Give me the paper!”

He sat down at a table, where there was a pen and a bottle of ink and wrote boldly: “Will Bransford.” With a grin he passed the paper back.

Sanderson stared, then a smile wreathed his lips, for the signature was seemingly a duplicate of that which had been written at the bottom of the letter Will Bransford had written to his father.

On his way to return the paper to Dale, Sanderson paused to listen again to Owen, who whispered to him. Sanderson stiffened, looked hard at Owen, and then grinned with straight lips. In less than no time he was out of the house and confronting Dale.

He watched while the latter looked at the signature; he saw the expression of disappointment that swept over Dale’s face. Then Sanderson spoke coldly:

“Right and proper, eh, Dale? Now I’ll trouble you for that letter that my dad dropped about a year ago—the one you picked up. It was a letter from me, an’ dad had let you read it. Fork it over, or I’ll bore you an’ take it from your clothes!”

CHAPTER XI

THE ULTIMATUM

DALE'S face whitened; for a moment he sat rigid, staring, his eyes boring into Sanderson's. Then he reached into a pocket, drew out a dirty envelope, and threw it at Sanderson's feet.

"You're a damned smart boy, ain't you, Bransford?" he sneered. "But I'm out to get you—remember that!"

"And you remember this, Dale!"

Sanderson was at the head of the horse Dale rode. His eyes were blazing with suppressed fury, brought on by the other's threat. "There's goin' to be a new deal in the basin. From now on I'm runnin' things—an' they're runnin' square! I ain't got any use for any law but this!" He tapped the butt of his six-shooter significantly. "An if you go to gettin' mixed up with the Double A or the Nyland ranch you'll get it—plenty!"

Dale grinned, hideously. Then he kicked his horse in the ribs and rode away.

Mary Bransford had not moved from her position on the porch. Sanderson watched Dale ride away,

then he smiled at Mary and entered the house. Mary followed him. She saw Owen standing in the sitting-room, and her face showed her surprise.

Sanderson explained. "Owen an' me framed up on Dale," he said. "You saw it work."

"You'll be careful, won't you, Will?" she said.

"Deal," smilingly insisted Sanderson.

"Deal," she repeated, giving him a look that made him blush. Then she went into one of the other rooms, and Sanderson and Owen went outside. At the corner of the stable Sanderson halted and faced Owen.

"You've got some explainin' to do," he said. "How did you know Dale had a letter from Will Bransford to his father; an' how did you know that Dale wanted me to write my name on that brand-registering blank so he could compare it with Will Bransford's name on the letter?"

"Will Bransford told me he wrote such a letter; he showed me a letter from his dad which told how he had dropped Will's letter and how Dale had picked it up. Dale thought old Bransford hadn't seen him pick up the letter—but Bransford did see him. And last night I was snooping around over at the Bar D and I overheard Dale and Silverthorn cooking up this deal."

Sanderson grinned with relief. "Well," he said.

“that name-signing deal sure had me considerable fussed up.” He told Owen of his mental torture following the discovery of the letter that had disappeared from the dresser drawer. “We’ve got to run together from now on,” he told Owen. “I’ll be Bransford an’ you’ll be Bransford’s name. Mebbe between us we’ll make a whole man.”

Over at the Bar D, Dale was scowling at Silverthorn.

“He ain’t Will Bransford,” Dale declared. “He signed his name all O. K. an’ regular, just the same as it was on the letter. But just the same he ain’t a Bransford. There ain’t no Bransford ever had an eye in him like he’s got. He’s a damned iceberg for nerve, an’ there’s more fight in him than there is in a bunch of wildcats—if you get him started!”

“Just the same,” smiled Silverthorn, silkily, “we’ll get the Double A. Look here—” And the two bent their heads together over Dale’s desk.

CHAPTER XII

DALE MOVES

A PASSIONATE hatred of Alva Dale was slowly gripping Sanderson. It had been aroused on that first day of his meeting with the man, when he had seen Dale standing in front of the stable, bullying Mary Bransford and Peggy Nyland and her brother. At that time, however, the emotion Sanderson felt had been merely dislike—as Sanderson had always disliked men who attempted to bully others.

Sanderson's hatred of Dale was beginning to dominate him; it was overwhelming all other emotions. It dulled his sense of guilt for the part he was playing in deceiving Mary Bransford; it made him feel in a measure justified in continuing to deceive her.

For he divined that without his help Mary would lose the Double A.

Sanderson had always loved a fight, and the prospect of bringing defeat and confusion upon Dale was one that made his pulses leap with delight.

He got up on the morning following Dale's visit, tingling with eagerness. And yet there was no sign of emotion in his face when he sat with Mary Brans-

ford at breakfast, and he did not even look at her when he left the house, mounted his horse, and rode up the gorge that split the butte at the southern end of the range.

All morning he prowled over the table-land, paying a great deal of attention to the depth of the gorge, estimating its capacity for holding water, scanning the far reaches of the big basin carefully, and noting the location of the buildings dotting it.

Shortly after noon he rode back to the house and came upon Mary in the kitchen.

"I've put off askin' until now," he said while eating the food that Mary placed before him. "How much money did dad leave?"

"Not much," she said. "He was never very prosperous. It took a great deal to send me to school, and the thousand I sent you I saved myself out of the allowance he gave me. I think there are three thousand dollars to father's credit at the bank in Okar."

"Where's Okar?"

She looked quickly at him. "Don't you remember Okar? That little town just beyond the mouth of the basin? Why, you've been there a good many times, Will, on errands for father. There wasn't much to Okar when you were here—just a few shanties and a store. Surely you remember!"

Sanderson flushed. "I reckon I do remember, now that you speak of it," he lied. "But I don't think Okar has grown much."

"Okar has grown to be an important town—for this locality," Mary smiled. "You see, the railroad has made it grow. It is now quite large, and has a bank and a dozen or more stores. It is a depot for supplies for a big section, and the railroad company has built large corrals there. A man named Silverthorn—and Alva Dale—are the rulers of Okar, now."

"Who is Silverthorn?"

"He is connected with the railroad company—a promoter, or something of that character. He is trying to make a boom town of Okar. He has bought a great deal of land in the basin."

"You know what he wants the land for?" Sanderson smiled at her.

"For speculation purposes, I suppose. If he could get water——"

"You've figured it out," said Sanderson. "But he won't get water. The water belongs to the Double A—to me an' to you. An' we're goin' to sell it ourselves."

"You mean——" began Mary.

"That we're going to build an irrigation dam—with all the fixin's. You and me."

The girl sat erect, her eyes luminous and eager. "Do you think we can do it?" she whispered.

"Do you think you could trust me with the three thousand you said dad left? An' would you be willin' to mortgage the Double A—if we needed more money?"

"Why," she declared, breathlessly, "the Double A is yours—to do with as you see fit. If you want to try—and you think there is a chance to win—why, why—go to it!"

"You're a brick!" grinned Sanderson. "We'll start the ball to rollin' right away."

Sanderson could not escape the vigorous hug she gave him, but he did manage to evade her lips, and he went out of the house blushing and grinning.

It was late in the afternoon when he got to Okar. Barney Owen was with him. The two rode into town, dismounted at a hitching rail in front of a building across the front of which was a sign:

THE OKAR HOTEL

Okar was flourishing—as Mary Bransford said. At its northwestern corner the basin widened, spreading between the shoulders of two mountains and meeting a vast stretch of level land that seemed to be endless.

Okar lay at the foot of the mountain that lifted its bald knob at the eastern side of the basin's mouth. Two glittering lines of steel that came from out of the obscurity of distance eastward skirted Okar's buildings and passed westward into an obscurity equally distant.

The country around Okar was devoted to cattle. Sanderson's practiced eye told him that. The rich grassland that spread from Okar's confines was the force that had brought the town into being, and the railroad would make Okar permanent.

Okar did not look permanent, however. It was of the type of the average cow-town of the western plains—artificial and crude. Its buildings were of frame, hurriedly knocked together, representing the haste of a people in whom the pioneer instinct was strong and compelling—who cared nothing for appearances, but who fought mightily for wealth and progress.

Upon Okar was the stamp of newness, and in its atmosphere was the eagerness and the fervor of commercialism. Okar was the trade mart of a section of country larger than some of the Old World states.

Fringing the hitching rails in front of its buildings were various vehicles—the heavy wagons of Mexican freighters, the light buckboard of the cattleman,

and the prairie schooner of the homesteader. Mingling with the vehicles were the cow-ponies of horsemen who had ridden into town on various errands; and in the company corrals were many cattle awaiting shipment.

Sanderson stood beside his horse at the hitching rail for a look at Okar.

There was one street—wide and dust-windrowed, with two narrow board walks skirting it. The buildings—mostly of one story—did not interest Sanderson, for he had seen their kind many times, and his interest centered upon the people.

“Different from Tombstone,” he told Owen as the two entered the hotel. “Tombstone is cattle—Okar is cattle *and* business. I sort of like cattle better.”

Owen grinned. “Cattle are too slow for some of Okar’s men,” he said. “There’s men here that figure on making a killing every day—financially. Gamblers winning big stakes, supply dealers charging twenty times the value of their stuff; a banker wanting enormous interest on his money; the railroad company gobbling everything in sight—and Silverthorn and Dale framing up to take all the land and the water-rights. See that short, fat man playing cards with the little one at that table?”

He indicated a table near the rear of the barroom, visible through an archway that opened from the

room in which a clerk with a thin, narrow face and an alert eye presided at a rough desk.

“That’s Maison—Tom Maison, Okar’s banker. They tell me he’d skin his grandmother if he thought he could make a dollar out of the deal.” Owen grinned. “He’s the man you’re figuring to borrow money from—to build your dam.”

“I’ll talk with him tomorrow,” said Sanderson.

In their room Sanderson removed some of the stains of travel. Then, telling Owen he would see him at dusk, he went out into the street.

Okar was buzzing with life and humming with activity when Sanderson started down the board walk. In Okar was typified the spirit of the West that was to be—the intense hustle and movement that were to make the town as large and as powerful as many of its sister cities.

Threading his way through the crowd on the board walk, Sanderson collided with a man. He grinned, not looking at the other, apologized, and was proceeding on his way, when he chanced to look toward the doorway of the building he was passing.

Alva Dale was standing just inside the doorway, watching him, and as Sanderson’s gaze met his Dale grinned sneeringly.

Sanderson’s lips twitched with contempt. His own smile matched Dale’s in the quality of its hostility.

Sanderson was about to pass on when someone struck him heavily between the shoulders. He staggered and lurched against the rough board front of the building going almost to his knees.

When he could steady himself he wheeled, his hand at his hip. Standing near him, grinning maliciously, was the man with whom he had collided.

In the man's right hand was a pistol.

"Bump into me, will you—you locoed short-horn!" sneered the man as Sanderson turned. He cursed profanely, incoherently. But he did not shoot.

The weapon in his hand began to sag curiously, the fingers holding it slowly slipping from the stock. And the man's face—thin and seamed—became chalklike beneath the tan upon it. His eyes, furtive and wolfish, bulged with astonishment and recognition, and his mouth opened vacuously.

"Deal Sanderson!" he said, weakly. "Good Lord! I didn't git a good look at you! I'm in the wrong pew, Deal, an' I sure don't want none of your game!"

"Dal Colton," said Sanderson. His voice was cold and even as he watched the other sheathe his gun. "Didn't know me, eh? But you was figurin' on pluggin' me."

He walked close to the man and stuck his face

close to the other, his lips in a straight line. He knew Colton to be one of the most conscienceless "killers" in the section of the country near Tombstone.

"Who was you lookin' for, then?" demanded Sanderson.

"Not you—that's a cinch!" grinned the other, fidgeting nervously under Sanderson's gaze. He whispered to Sanderson, for in the latter's eyes he saw signs of a cold resolve to sift the matter to the bottom:

"Look here, Square; I sure don't want none of your game. Things has been goin' sorta offish for me for a while, an' so when I meets a guy a while ago who tells me to 'git' a guy named Will Bransford—pointin' you out to me when your back was turned—I takes him up. I wasn't figurin'——"

"Who told you to get Bransford?" demanded Sanderson.

"A guy named Dale," whispered Colton.

Sanderson turned swiftly. He saw Dale still standing in the doorway. Dale was grinning coldly, and Sanderson knew he suspected what had been whispered by Colton. But before Sanderson could move, Dale's voice was raised loudly and authoritatively:

"Arrest that man—quick!"

A man behind Sanderson lunged forward, twisting Sanderson around with the impetus of the movement. Off his balance, Sanderson saw three or four other men dive toward Colton. He saw Colton reach for the weapon he had previously sheathed; saw the weapon knocked from his hand.

Four men seized Colton, and he struggled helplessly in their grasp as he was dragged away, his face working malignantly as he looked back at Dale.

“Double-crossed!” he yelled; “you damned, grinnin’ coyote!”

A crowd had gathered; Sanderson shouldered his way toward Dale and faced him. Sanderson’s face was white with rage, but his voice was cold and steady as he stood before Dale.

“So that’s the way you work, is it, Dale? I’ll give you what you was goin’ to pay Colton, if you’ll pull your gun right now!”

Dale’s smile was maddeningly insolent.

“Bah!” he said, “I’m an officer of the law. There are a dozen of my men right behind you! Pull your gun! I’d like nothing better than to have an excuse to perforate you! Sanderson, eh?” he laughed. “Well, I’ve heard of you. Square Deal, eh? And here you are, masqueradin’ as Will Bransford! That’s goin’ to be quite an interestin’ situation at the Double A when things get to goin’, eh?”

He laughed again, raucously, and turned his back to Sanderson, disappearing into the store.

Sanderson glanced behind him. Several men were watching him, their faces set and determined. Sanderson grinned at them and continued his interrupted walk down the street.

But something had been added to his hatred of Alva Dale—the knowledge that Dale would not scruple to murder him on any pretext. Sanderson's grin grew wider as he walked, for he knew of several men who had harbored such evil intentions against him, and they——

But Dale was a stronger antagonist, and he had power and authority behind him. Still, his spirit undaunted, Sanderson's grin grew wider, though perhaps more grim. It was entirely worth while, now, the deceiving of the woman he had hoped to protect; it wasn't her fight, but his. And he would make the fight a good one.

CHAPTER XIII

A PLOT THAT WORKED

SANDERSON left the board walk and cut through a yard to the railroad. He followed the rails until he reached the station. To his question the station agent informed him that Dave Silverthorn might be found in his office on the second floor of the building.

Sanderson went up. A sign on a glass door bore Silverthorn's name. Sanderson entered without knocking.

Silverthorn was seated at a desk in a far corner of the room. He looked up as Sanderson opened the door, and said shortly:

“ Well—what is it? ”

Sanderson crossed the room and halted beside the desk. For an instant neither man spoke. Sanderson saw a man of medium height with a rather well-rounded stomach, sloping shoulders, and a sleek, well-fed appearance. His cheeks were full and florid, his lips large and loose; his eyes cold, calculating, and hard.

Silverthorn saw a lean-faced, broad-shouldered

young man with a strong chin, a firm mouth, and an eye that fixed him with a steady, unwavering interest.

By the gleam in Sanderson's eyes Silverthorn divined that he was in the presence of a strong, opposing force, and he drew a slow, deep breath.

"Well?" he said, again.

"You're Dave Silverthorn?"

The other nodded. "What can I do for you?" he questioned.

"You can listen while I talk," said Sanderson.

"I'm Will Bransford, of the Double A. I have heard from several sources that you an' Alva Dale are after the title to the Double A. You want the water-rights. You can't have them. An' the title to the Double A stays with me. Understand that? I am goin' to hold on to the property.

"I've heard you can juggle the law—that's your business. But you can't juggle the law enough to horn in on the Double A. If you do, I'm comin' for you with a law of my own!" He tapped his gun holster significantly.

"That's all," he concluded. "Are you sure you understand?"

"Perfectly," answered Silverthorn. He was smiling mirthlessly, his face blotched and bloated with mingled fear and rage. "But I'll have you under-

stand this: I am not afraid of your threats. You can't bully me. The S. and M. Railroad has dealt with your kind on more than one occasion. There is an opportunity here to develop a large section of land, and my company means to do it. We mean to be fair, however. We'll buy your title to the Double A. How much do you want for it?"

Sanderson grinned. "The Double A is not for sale. I wouldn't sell it to *you* for a million! You cheap crooks think that all you have to do is to take anything you want. I just stopped in to tell you that I'm wise to your game, an' that the kind of law I represent ain't cluttered up with angles an' technical processes. She runs straight to a square deal all around. That's all, Mr. Silverthorn."

He turned and went out, closing the door behind him.

He had not intended to have his talk with Tom Maison, Okar's banker, until the following morning. But upon returning to Okar's street he saw Maison ahead of him on the sidewalk. He followed the banker, saw him enter the front door of the bank building, and a few minutes later he was sitting opposite Maison at a table in the banker's private room.

Maison was short and pudgy, short of breath, with a pasty complexion.

“Will Bransford, eh?” he said, looking sharply at Sanderson over the table. “H’m. You don’t look much like your father.”

“Nor I don’t act like him, either,” smiled Sanderson. “For instance,” he went on at the banker’s quick look, “dad was slow; he wasn’t alive to his opportunities. How long has it been since the railroad came to Okar?”

“Five years.”

“Then dad was five years slower than he ought to have been. He ought to have seen what water would do to the basin. He didn’t—left that for me.”

“Meaning what?” asked Maison, as Sanderson paused.

“Meanin’ that I want to turn the Double A water into the basin. That’s what I came here to see you for. I want to mortgage the Double A to the limit; I want to build a dam, irrigation canals, locks, an’ everything that goes with it. It will take a heap of money.”

Maison reflected. “And you want me to supply it,” he said. “Yes, that project will require a large sum. H’m! It is—er—do you purpose to try to handle the project yourself, Mr. Bransford?”

“Me an’ Mary Bransford. I’ll hire an engineer.”

Maison’s cheeks reddened a trifle. He seemed to lose interest slightly.

“Don’t you think it is rather too big a thing for one man to handle—aided by a woman?” He smiled blandly at Sanderson. “I have thought of the water situation in the basin. It is my opinion that it might be worked out successfully.

“Why not organize a company—say a company composed of influential and powerful men like Silverthorn and Dale and—er—myself. We could issue stock, you know. Each would take a certain number of shares—paying you for them, of course, and leaving you in possession of a large block of it—say—forty per cent. We could organize, elect officers——”

“An’ freeze me out,” smiled Sanderson.

Maison sat erect and gazed haughtily at his visitor.

“No one has ever questioned my honesty,” he declared.

Sanderson smiled at him. “Nor I don’t. But I want to play her a lone hand.”

“I am afraid I wouldn’t be interested in that sort of project,” said Maison.

The thought that Maison *would* be interested—not publicly, but privately—made Sanderson grin. The grin angered Maison; he arose smiling coldly.

“I am sorry to have taken your time, Mr. Bransford,” he said, dismissing his visitor.

Sanderson did not give up. "My father left some money in your bank," he said; "I'll take it."

"Certainly," said the banker. He got a withdrawal blank and laid it before Sanderson.

"The amount is three thousand two hundred," he said. "Just fill that out and sign your name and you can have the money."

Sanderson did not sign; he sat, looking at the blank, suddenly afflicted with the knowledge that once more the troublesome "Bransford" signature had placed him in a dilemma.

Undoubtedly Maison, Silverthorn, and Dale were confederates in this matter, and Dale's insistence that he sign the register claim was a mere subterfuge to obtain a copy of the Bransford signature in order to make trouble for him. It occurred to Sanderson that the men suspected him, and he grinned coldly as he raised his eyes to Maison.

Maison was watching him, keenly; and his flush when he saw Sanderson looking at him convinced the latter that his suspicions were not without foundation.

If Sanderson could have known that he had hardly left the hotel when a man whispered to Maison; and that Maison had said to the man: "All right, I'll go down and wait for him," Sanderson could not have more accurately interpreted Maison's flush.

Sanderson's grin grew grim. "It's a frame-up," he told himself. His grin grew saturnine. He got up, folded the withdrawal blank and stuck it in a pocket.

"I'm leavin' the money here tonight," he said. "For a man that ain't been to town in a long while, there'd be too many temptations yankin' at me."

He went out, leaving Maison to watch him from a window, a flush of chagrin on his face.

Sanderson walked down the street toward the hotel. He would have Owen sign the withdrawal blank before morning—that would defeat Maison's plan to gain evidence of the impersonation.

Sanderson had not been gone from Silverthorn's office more than five minutes when Dale entered. Silverthorn was sitting at his desk scowling, his face pale with big, heavy lines in it showing the strain of his interview with Sanderson.

"Bransford's been here!" guessed Dale, looking at Silverthorn.

Silverthorn nodded, cursing.

"You don't need to feel conceited," laughed Dale; "he's been to see me, too."

Dale related what had happened on the street some time before, and Silverthorn's scowl deepened.

"There are times when you don't seem to be able

to think at all, Dale!" he declared. "After this, when you decide to do a thing, see me first—or Maison. The last thing we want to happen right now is to have this fake Bransford killed."

"Why?"

"I've just got word from Las Vegas that he's submitted his affidavit establishing his identity, and that the court has accepted it. That settles the matter until—or unless—we can get evidence to the contrary. And if he dies without us getting that evidence we are through."

"Him dyin' would make things sure for us," contended Dale. "Mary Bransford wouldn't have any claim—us havin' proof that she ain't a Bransford."

"This fellow is no fool," declared Silverthorn. "Suppose he's wise to us, which he might be, and he has willed the property to the girl. Where would we be, not being able to prove that he isn't Will Bransford?"

Dale meditated. Then he made a wry face. "That's right," he finally admitted. He made a gesture of futility. "I reckon I'll let you do the plannin' after this."

"All right," said Silverthorn, mollified. "Have you set Morley on Barney Owen?"

"Owen was goin' right strong a few minutes after this Bransford guy left him," grinned Dale.

“All right,” said Silverthorn, “go ahead the way we planned it. But don’t have our friend killed.”

When Sanderson entered the hotel the clerk was alone in the office pondering over the register.

Dusk had fallen, and the light in the office was rather dim. Through the archway connecting the office with the saloon came a broad beam of light from a number of kerosene lamps. From beyond the archway issued the buzz of voices and the clink of glasses; peering through the opening Sanderson could see that the barroom was crowded.

Sanderson mounted the stairs leading from the office. When he had left Owen, the latter had told Sanderson that it was his intention to spend the time until the return of his friend in reading.

Owen, however, was not in the room. Sanderson descended the stairs, walked to the archway that led into the saloon, and looked inside. In a rear corner of the barroom he saw Owen, seated at a table with several other men. Owen’s face was flushed; he was talking loudly and extravagantly.

Sanderson remembered what Owen had told him concerning his appetite for strong liquor; he remembered, too, that Owen was in possession of a secret which, if divulged, would deliver Mary Bransford into the hands of her enemies.

Sanderson's blood rioted with rage and disgust. He crossed the barroom and stood behind Owen. The latter did not see him. One of the men with Owen did see Sanderson, though, and he looked up impudently, and smilingly pushed a filled glass of amber-colored liquor toward Owen.

"You ain't half drinkin', Owen," he said.

Sanderson reached over, took the glass, threw its contents on the floor and grasped Owen by the shoulder. His gaze met the tempter's, coldly.

"My friend ain't drinkin' no more tonight," he declared.

The tempter sneered, his body stiffening.

"He ain't, eh?" he grinned, insolently. "I reckon you don't know him; he likes whisky as a fish likes water."

Several men in the vicinity guffawed loudly.

Owen was drunk. His hair was rumpled, his face was flushed, and his eyes were bleared and wide with an unreasoning, belligerent light as he got up, swaying unsteadily, and looked at Sanderson.

"Not drink any more?" he demanded loudly. "Who says I can't? I've got lots of money, and there's lots of booze here. Who says I can't drink any more?"

And now, for the first time, he seemed to realize that Sanderson stood before him. But the knowl-

edge appeared merely to increase his belligerence to an insane fury. He broke from Sanderson's restraining grasp and stood off, reeling, looking at Sanderson with the grin of a satyr.

"Look who's telling me I can't drink any more!" he taunted, so that nearly every man in the room turned to look at him. "It's my guardian angel, gentlemen—Will Bransford, of the Double A! Will Bransford—ha, ha, ha! Will Bransford! Come an' look at him, gentlemen! Says I can't drink any more booze. He's running the Double A, Bransford is. There's a lot I could tell you about Bransford—a whole lot! He ain't——"

His maudlin talk broke off short, for Sanderson had stepped to his side and placed a hand over his mouth. Owen struggled, broke away, and shouted:

"Damn you, let me alone! I'm going to tell these people who you are. You're——"

Again his talk was stilled. This time the method was swift and certain. Sanderson took another step toward him and struck. His fist landed on Owen's jaw, resounding with a vicious *smack!* in the sudden silence that had fallen, and Owen crumpled and sank to the floor in an inert heap.

Sanderson was bending over him, preparing to carry him to his room, when there came an interruption. A big man, with a drawn six-shooter,

stepped to Sanderson's side. A dozen more shoved forward and stood near him, the crowd moving back.

Sanderson sensed the movement and stood erect, leaving Owen still on the floor. One look at the hostile faces around him convinced Sanderson that the men were there by design.

He grinned mirthlessly into the face of the man with the drawn pistol.

"Frame-up, eh?" he said. "What's the game?"

"You're wanted for drawin' a gun on Dave Silverthorn—in his office. I'm a deputy sheriff, an' I've got a warrant for you. Want to see it?"

Sanderson did not answer. Here was a manifestation of Dale's power and cupidity.

The charge was a mere subterfuge, designed to deprive him of his liberty. Sanderson had no intention of submitting.

The deputy saw resistance in the gleam of Sanderson's eyes, and he spoke sharply, warningly:

"Don't try any funny business; I've a dozen men here!"

Sanderson laughed in his face. He lunged forward, striking bitterly with the movement. The deputy's body doubled forward—Sanderson's fist had been driven into his stomach. His gun clattered to the floor; he reached out, trying to grasp Sanderson, who evaded him and struck upward viciously.

The deputy slid to the floor, and Sanderson stood beside the table, his gun menacing the deputy's followers.

Sanderson had worked fast. Possibly the deputy's men had anticipated no resistance from Sanderson, or they had been stunned with the rapidity with which he had placed their leader out of action.

Not one of them had drawn a weapon. They watched Sanderson silently as he began to back away from them, still covering them with his pistol.

Sanderson had decided to desert Owen; the man had proved a traitor, and could not expect any consideration. Owen might talk—Sanderson expected he would talk; but he did not intend to jeopardize his liberty by staying to find out.

He stepped backward cautiously, for he saw certain of the men begin to move restlessly. He cautioned them, swinging the muzzle of his pistol back and forth, the crowd behind him splitting apart as he retreated.

He had gone a dozen steps when someone tripped him. He fell backward, landing on his shoulders, his right elbow striking hard on the board floor and knocking the pistol out of his hand.

He saw the men surge forward, and he made a desperate effort to get to his feet. But he did not succeed. He was on his knees when several men,

throwing themselves at him, landed on top of him. Their combined weight crushed him to the floor, but he squirmed out of the mass and got to his feet, striking at the faces he saw around him, worrying the men hither and yon, dragging them with him as he reeled under savage blows that were rained on him.

He had torn himself almost free; one man still clung to him, and he was trying to shake the fellow off, that he might hit him effectively, when a great weight seemed to fall on his head, blackness surrounded him, and he pitched face down on the floor.

CHAPTER XIV

THE VOICE OF THE COYOTE

WHEN Sanderson regained consciousness he was lying on his back on a board floor. His head seemed to have been smashed, he was dizzy and weak, but he sat up and looked around him.

Then he grinned wanly.

He was in jail. A heavy, barred door was in front of him; turning his head he saw an iron-grated window behind him. Door and window were set in heavy stone walls; two other stone walls, with a narrow iron cot set against one of them, rose blankly on either side.

Sanderson got up, reeling, and went to the window. Darkness had come; he could see Okar's lights flickering and winking at him from the buildings that skirted the street. Various sounds reached his ears—Okar's citizens were enjoying themselves.

Sanderson did not watch the lights long. He walked to the cot, seated himself on its edge, rested his elbows on his knees and his chin in the upturned palms of his hands and reflected on what had occurred to him.

Remembering the four thousand dollars in bills of large denomination that Burroughs had paid him when leaving the Pig-Pen, his hand went to the money belt around his waist.

Belt and money were gone!

Sanderson got up again, walked to the door and called.

A heavy-featured man slouched down the corridor and halted near the door.

"Awake, eh?" he grinned. "Dale sure did hand it to you—now, didn't he? Well," he added as Sanderson's lips straightened at his words, "what's eatin' you?"

"I had a belt with some money in it—four thousand. What's become of it?"

"Four thousand!" the man jeered. "That bump on the head is still affectin' you, I reckon. Four thousand—shucks!" He laughed. "Well, I ain't seen it—if that's any consolation to you. If you'd had it when you come here I'd sure seen it."

"Who brought me here?"

"Dale and his first deputy—the guy you poked in the stummick, over in the Okar Hotel. They tell me you fi't like hell! What's Dale got ag'in' you? He sure was some het up about you."

Sanderson did not answer. He turned his back to the jailer and walked to the cot, again sitting on its

edge. He heard the jailer sniff contemptuously, but he paid no attention to him.

Prominent in Sanderson's thoughts was the realization that Dale had taken his money. He knew that was the last of it—Dale would not admit taking it. Sanderson had intended to use the four thousand on the Double A irrigation project. The sum, together with the three thousand he meant to draw from the Okar bank, would have been enough to make a decent start.

Sanderson had some bitter thoughts as he sat on the edge of the cot, all of them centering around Dale, Silverthorn, Maison, Owen, Mary Bransford, and himself. He realized that he had been defeated in the first clash with the forces opposed to him, that Owen had turned traitor, that Mary Bransford's position now was more precarious than it had been before his coming, and that he had to deal with resourceful, desperate, and unscrupulous men.

And yet, sitting there at the edge of the cot, Sanderson grinned. The grin did not make his face attractive, for it reflected something of the cold, bitter humor and savage passion that had gripped his soul.

At noon the next day Sanderson, looking out of the window of his cell, heard a sound at the door.

He turned, to see Silverthorn standing in the corridor.

Silverthorn smiled blandly at him.

"Over it, I see," he said. "They used you rather roughly, eh? Well, they tell me you made them step some."

Sanderson deliberately turned his back and continued to look out of the window.

"On your dignity, eh?" sneered Silverthorn. "Well, let me tell you something. We've heard a lot about you—from Dal Colton and Barney Owen. Morley—one of our men—got Owen soused last night, as per orders, and Owen spilled his knowledge of you all over the town. It's pretty well known, now, that you are Deal Sanderson, from down Tombstone way.

"I don't know what your game was, but I think it's pretty well queered by now. I suppose you had some idea of impersonating Bransford, hoping to get a slice of the property. I don't blame you for trying. It was up to us to see that you didn't get away with it.

"But we don't want to play hog. If you'll admit before a notary that you are not Will Bransford we'll hand you back the four thousand Dale took from you, give you ten thousand in addition and safe conduct out of the county. That strike you?"

Sanderson did not answer.

Silverthorn's face reddened. "You're a damned fool!" he sneered, venomously. "We'll keep you in jail here for a thousand years, if necessary. We'll do worse!

"Look here!" he suddenly said. But Sanderson did not turn. Silverthorn rattled a paper.

"Here's a withdrawal slip on the Okar bank, calling for three thousand two hundred dollars, signed by Will Bransford. Barney Owen drew the money last night and blew it in, gambling and drinking. He says he's been signing Bransford's name—forging it—at your orders. The signature he put on this paper is a dead ringer for the one on the registry blank you gave Dale.

"Dale saw Owen sign that. That's why he knew you are not Will Bransford. Understand? Maison will swear you signed the withdrawal slip and got the money. We'll prove that you are not Bransford, and you'll go to the Las Vegas pen for twenty years! Now, let's talk business!"

Sanderson turned. There was a mirthless grin on his face. He spoke loudly, calling the jailer.

When the latter appeared in the corridor beside Silverthorn, Sanderson addressed him without looking at the other:

"You ain't on your job a heap, are you? There's

a locoed coyote barkin' at me through the door, there. Run him out, will you—he's disturbin' me plenty."

He turned from the door, stretched himself on the cot, and with his face to the wall listened while Silverthorn cursed.

CHAPTER XV

DALE PAYS A VISIT

SHORTLY after midnight Sanderson was sound asleep on the cot in the cell when a strange, scraping noise awakened him. He lay still for a long time, listening, until he discovered that the sound came from the window. Then he sat up stealthily and looked around to see, framed in the starlit gloom of the night, the face of Barney Owen, staring in through the window at him.

The sight of Owen enraged Sanderson, but his curiosity drove him to the window.

The little man was hanging to the iron bars; his neck muscles were straining, his face was red and his eyes bright.

“Don’t talk, now!” he warned. “The boss of the dump is awake and he’ll hear. He’s in his room; there’s nobody else around. I wanted to tell you that I’m going to knock him silly and get you out of this!”

“Why?” mocked Sanderson, lowly.

Owen’s face grew redder. “Oh, I know I’ve got something coming, but I’m going to get you out all the same. I’ve got our horses and guns. Be ready!”

He slipped down. Sanderson could hear his feet thud faintly on the sand outside.

Sanderson got into his clothes and stood at the cell door, waiting. For a long time he heard no sound, but presently he caught the clank of a door, followed by a swift step, and Owen stood in the corridor before the cell door, a bunch of keys in his hand.

There was no word spoken. Owen unlocked the door, Sanderson slipped out, Owen passed him the six-shooter he had lost in the barroom of the Okar Hotel, and the two slipped noiselessly down the corridor.

A minute later they were mounting the horses that Owen had brought, and shortly afterward they were moving like shadows away from the outskirts of Okar.

Not until they were well out in the big basin did either of them speak. And then Sanderson said, shortly:

"Silverthorn was tellin' me you gassed everything. Are you feelin' better over it?"

Owen's head bent over his horse's mane; his chin was on his chest when he answered:

"Come and kill me."

"Hell!" exploded Sanderson, disgustedly. "If there was anything comin' to you killin' would be

too good for you. You ain't done anything to me, you sufferin' fool—not a thing! What you've done you've done to Mary Bransford. When you see Dale an' Silverthorn grabbin' the Double A, an' Mary Bransford ridin' away, homeless—you'll have feelin's of remorse, mebbe—if you've got any *man* in you at all!"

Owen writhed and groaned.

"It was the whisky—the cursed whisky!" he whispered. "I can't let it alone—I love it! And once I get a taste of it, I'm gone—I'm a stark, star-
ing lunatic!"

"I'd swear to that," grimly agreed Sanderson.

"I didn't mean to say a word to anybody," wailed the little man. "Do you think I'd do anything to harm Mary Bransford—after what she did for me? But I did—I must have done it. Dale said I did, Silverthorn said I did, and you say I did. But I don't remember. Silverthorn said I signed a receipt for some money from the Okar bank—three thousand, odd. I don't remember. Oh, but I'm——"

"Calling yourself names won't get you back to where you was before you made a fool of yourself," Sanderson told him, pityingly. "An' me tellin' you what I think of you won't relieve my feelin's a whole lot, for there ain't words enough layin' around loose."

"What I want to know is this: did you go clean

loco, or do you remember *anything* that happened to you? Do you know who got the money you drew from the bank?"

"Dale," answered Owen. "He had that, for I remember him counting it in the back room of the hotel. There was more, too; I heard him telling Silverthorn there was about seven thousand in all. Silverthorn wanted him to put it all back in the bank, but Dale said there was just enough for him to meet his pay-roll—that he owed his men a lot of back pay. He took it with him."

"My four thousand," said Sanderson, shortly.

"Yours?" Owen paled.

"Dale lifted my money belt," Sanderson returned. "I was wonderin' what he did with it. So that's what."

He relapsed into a grim silence, and Owen did not speak again.

They rode several miles in that fashion—Owen keeping his horse slightly behind Sanderson's, his gaze on the other's face, his own white with remorse and anxiety.

At last he heard Sanderson laugh, and the sound of it made him grit his teeth in impotent agony.

"Sanderson," he said, gulping, "I'm sorry."

"Sure," returned the other. "If I hadn't wised up to that quite a spell ago, you'd be back on the

trail, waitin' for some coyote to come along an' get his supper."

They rode in silence for a long time. They came to the gentle slope of the basin and began to climb it.

A dozen times Owen rode close to Sanderson, his lips trembling over unuttered words, but each time he dropped back without speaking. His eyes, fixed worshipfully on the back of the big, silent man ahead of him, were glowing with anxiety and wonder.

In the ghostly darkness of the time before the gray forerunner of the dawn appears on the horizon they came in sight of the Double A ranchhouse.

Sanderson was still leading. The ranchhouse burst upon his vision as his horse topped a rise that had obscured his view of the ranchhouse, and he saw it, clearly outlined.

Riding down the slope of the rise he smiled. For there was a light in one of the ranchhouse windows. Mary had left it burn on his account, he divined.

He halted and allowed Owen to come near him.

"Mary ain't to hear about this deal tonight," he told the little man. "Not a peep—understand?"

Without waiting for an answer he rode onward.

Thinking that, perhaps, in spite of the burning lamp Mary might be sleeping, Sanderson cautiously dismounted at the corral gates, and, leaving Owen

to put his own horse away, he walked toward the house, stealthily, for he did not wish to awaken the girl.

Halfway across the ranchhouse yard, Sanderson saw a shadow cross the light in the window. Again he grinned, thinking Mary had not gone to bed after all.

But, going forward more unconcernedly, Sanderson's smile faded and was succeeded by a savage frown. For in the shadow formed by the little "L" at the junction of the house and porch, he saw a horse saddled and bridled.

Suddenly alert, and yielding to the savage rage that gripped him, Sanderson stole softly forward and looked closely at the animal. He recognized it instantly as Dale's, and in the instant, his face pale, his eyes blazing with passion, he was on the porch, peering through one of the darkened windows.

Inside he saw Dale and Mary Bransford. They were in the sitting-room. Dale was sitting in a big chair, smoking a cigar, one arm carelessly thrown over the back of the chair, his legs crossed, his attitude that of the master.

Standing perhaps a dozen feet from him was Mary Bransford.

The girl's eyes were wide with fright and astonishment, disbelief, incredulity—and several other

emotions that Sanderson could not analyze. He did not try. One look at her sufficed to tell him that Dale was baiting her, tantalizing her, mocking her, and Sanderson's hatred for the man grew in intensity until it threatened to overwhelm him.

There was in his mind an impulse to burst into the house and kill Dale where he sat. It was the primitive lust to destroy an unprincipled rival that had seized Sanderson, for he saw in Dale's eyes the bold passion of the woman hunter.

However, Sanderson conquered the impulse. He fought it with the marvelous self-control and implacable determination that had made him feared and respected wherever men knew him, and in the end the faint, stiff grin on his face indicated that whatever he did would be done with deliberation.

This was an instance where the eavesdropper had some justification for his work, and Sanderson listened.

He heard Dale laugh—the sound of it made Sanderson's lips twitch queerly. He saw Mary cringe from Dale and press her hands over her breast. Dale's voice carried clearly to Sanderson.

"Ha, ha!" he said. "So *that* hurts, eh? Well, here's more of the same kind. We got Barney Owen drunk last night, and he admitted that he'd signed all of Sanderson's papers—the papers that were

supposed to have been signed by your brother. Why didn't Sanderson sign them? Why? Because Sanderson couldn't do it.

"Owen, who knew your brother in Arizona, signed them, because he knew how to imitate your brother's writing. Get that! Owen signed a bank receipt for the money old Bransford had in the bank. Owen got it and gave it to me. He was so drunk he didn't know what he was doing, but he could imitate your brother's writing, all right."

"You've got the money?" gasped the girl.

Again Dale laughed, mockingly. "Yep," he said, "I've got it. Three thousand two hundred. And I've got four thousand that belongs to that four-flusher, Square Deal. Seven thousand." He laughed again.

"Where is Sanderson?" questioned the girl.

"In jail, over in Okar." Dale paused long enough to enjoy the girl's distress. Then he continued: "Owen is in jail, too, by this time. Silverthorn and Maison are not taking any chances on letting him go around loose."

"Sanderson in jail!" gasped Mary. She seemed to droop; she staggered to a chair and sank into it, still looking at Dale, despair in her eyes.

Dale got up and walked to a point directly in front of her, looking down at her, triumphantly.

“That’s what,” he said. “In jail. Moreover, that’s where they’ll stay until this thing is settled. We mean to have the Double A. The sooner you realize that, the easier it will be for you.

“I’m offering you a way out of it—an easy way. That guy, Sanderson, ain’t on the level. He’s been working you, making a monkey of you—fooling you. He wants the Double A for himself. He’s been hanging around here, passing himself off as your brother, aiming to get on the good side of you—getting you to love him good and hard. Then mebbe he’d tell you, thinking that you’d forgive him. But mebbe that wasn’t his game at all. Mebbe he’d figured to grab the ranch and turn you out.

“Now, I’m offering you a whole lot. Mebbe you’ve thought I was sweet on that Nyland girl. Get that out of your mind. I was only fooling with her—like any man fools with a girl. I want her ranch—that’s all. But I don’t care a damn about the Double A, I want you. I’ve had my eye on you right along. Mebbe it won’t be marriage right away, but——”

“Alva Dale!”

The girl was on her feet, her eyes blazing.

Dale did not retreat from her; he stood smiling at her, his face wreathed in a huge grin. He was enjoying the girl.

Sanderson slipped along the wall of the house and opened the door. It creaked loudly on its hinges with the movement, causing both Dale and the girl to turn and face it.

Mary Bransford stood rigid as she saw Sanderson standing in the doorway, a flush sweeping swiftly over her face. There was relief in her eyes.

Astonishment and stark, naked fear were in Dale's eyes. He shrank back a step, and looked swiftly at Sanderson's right hand, and when he saw that it held a six-shooter he raised both his own hands, shoulder-high, the palms toward Sanderson.

"So you know it means shootin', eh?" said Sanderson grimly as he stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind him, slamming it shut with his left hand.

"Well, shootin' goes." There was the cold calm of decision in his manner; his eyes were ablaze with the accumulated hate and rage that had been aroused over what he had heard. The grin that he showed to Dale drew his lips into two straight, stiff lines.

"I reckon you think you've earned your red shirt, Dale," he said, "for tellin' tales out of school. Well, you'll get it. There's just one thing will save your miserable hide. You got that seven thousand on you?"

Dale hesitated, then nodded.

Sanderson spoke to Mary Bransford without removing his gaze from Dale:

“Get pen, ink, an’ paper.”

The girl moved quickly into another room, returning almost instantly with the articles requested.

“Sit down an’ write what I tell you to,” directed Sanderson.

Dale dropped into a chair beside a center-table, took up the pen, poised it over the paper, and looked at Sanderson.

“I am hereby returning to Deal Sanderson the seven thousand two hundred dollars I stole from him,” directed Sanderson. “I am doing this of my own accord—no one is forcin’ me,” went on Sanderson. “I want to add that I hereby swear that the charge of drawin’ a gun on Silverthorn was a frame-up, me an’ Silverthorn an’ Maison bein’ the guilty parties,” finished Sanderson.

“Now,” he added, when Dale had written as directed, “sign it.”

Dale signed and stood up, his face aflame with rage.

“I’ll take the money—now,” said Sanderson.

Dale produced it from various pockets, laying it on the table. He said nothing. Mary Bransford stood a little distance away, watching silently.

"Count it, Miss Bransford," said Sanderson when Dale had disgorged the money.

The two men stood silent as the girl fingered the bills. At last she looked at Sanderson and nodded.

The latter grinned. "Everything's regular, now," he said. He looked at Mary. "Do you want him killed, ma'am? He'd be a lot better off dead. You'd be better off, too. This kind of a skunk is always around, botherin' women — when there ain't no men around."

Mary shook her head with a decisive negative.

"Then he won't die, right now," said Sanderson. "He'll pull his freight away from the Double A, though, ma'am. An' he'll never come back."

He was talking to Dale through the girl, and Dale watched him, scowling.

"If he does come back, you'll tell me, won't you, ma'am? An' then there'll never be an Alva Dale to bother you again — or to go around robbin' honest men, an' tryin' to get them mixed up with the law."

And now he turned from the girl and spoke to Dale:

"You go right back to Okar an' tell Maison an' Silverthorn what has happened here tonight. Show them how the fear of God has got into your heart an' made you yearn to practice the principles of a square deal. Tell them that they'd better get to

goin' straight, too, for if they don't there's a guy which was named after a square deal that is goin' to snuff them off this hemisphere middlin' rapid. That's all. You'd better hit the breeze right back to Okar an' spread the good news."

He stood, a grim smile on his face, watching Dale as the latter walked to the door. When Dale stepped out on the porch Sanderson followed him, still regarding the movements of the other coldly and alertly.

Mary heard them—their steps on the boards of the porch; she heard the saddle leather creak as Dale climbed on his horse; she heard the sound of the hoofbeats as the horse clattered out of the ranch-house yard.

And then for several minutes she stood near the little table in the room, listening vainly for some sound that would tell her of the presence of Sanderson on the porch. None came.

At last, when she began to feel certain that he had gone to the bunkhouse, she heard a step on the porch and saw Sanderson standing in the doorway.

He grinned at her, meeting her gaze fairly.

"Dale told you a heap of truth, ma'am," he said. "I feel more like a man tonight than I've felt for a good many days—an' nights."

"Then it was true—as Dale said—that you are

not my brother?" said the girl. She was trying to make her voice sound severe, but only succeeded in making it quaver.

"I ain't your brother."

"And you came here to try to take the ranch away from me—to steal it?"

He flushed. "You've got four thousand of my money there, ma'am. You're to keep it. Mebbe that will help to show what my intentions were. About the rest—your brother an' all—I'll have to tell you. It's a thing you ought to know, an' I don't know what's been keepin' me from tellin' you all along.

"Mebbe it was because I was scared you'd take it hard. But since these sneaks have got to waggin' their tongues it'll have to be told. If you sit down by the table there, I'll tell you why I done what I did."

She took a chair beside the table and faced him, and, standing before her, speaking very gently, but frankly, he related what had occurred to him in the desert. She took it calmly, though there were times when her eyes glowed with a light that told of deep emotion. But she soon became resigned to the death of her brother and was able to listen to Sanderson's story of his motive in deceiving her.

When he related his emotion during their first

meeting—when he had told Dale that he was her brother, after yielding to the appeal in her eyes—she smiled.

“There was some excuse for it, after all,” she declared.

“An’ you ain’t blamin’ me—so much?” he asked.

“No,” she said. She blushed as she thought of the times she had kissed him. He was thinking of her kisses, too, and as their eyes met, each knew what the other was thinking about. Sanderson smiled at her and her eyes dropped.

“It wasn’t a square deal for me to take them, then, ma’am,” he told her. “But I’m goin’ to stay around here an’ fight Dale an’ his friends to a finish. That is, if you want me to stay. I’d like a straight answer. I ain’t hangin’ around where I ain’t wanted.”

Her eyes glowed as she looked at him.

“You’ll have to stay, now,” she said. “Will is dead, and you will have to stay here and brazen it out. They’d take the Double A from me surely, if you were to desert me. You will have to stay and insist that you are my brother!”

“That’s a contract,” he agreed. “But”—he looked at her, a flush on his face—“goin’ back to them kisses. It wasn’t a square deal. But I’m hop-in’ that a day will come——”

She got up, her face very red. "It is nearly morning," she interrupted.

"Yes," he smiled; "things are only beginnin'."

"You are impudent—and imprudent," she said, looking straight at him.

"An' hopeful," he answered, meeting her eyes.

Fifteen minutes later, stretched out on his bed, Sanderson saw the dawn breaking in the east. It reminded him of the morning he had seen the two riders above him on the edge of the arroyo. As on that other morning, he lay and watched the coming of the dawn. And when later he heard Mary moving about in the kitchen he got up, not having slept a wink, and went out to her.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked.

"How could I," he asked, "with a new day dawnin' for me?"

CHAPTER XVI

THE HAND OF THE ENEMY

WHEN in the bunkhouse the next morning Sanderson informed Barney Owen of what had occurred during the night, the latter looked fixedly at Sanderson.

“So she didn’t take it hard,” he said.

“Was you expectin’ her to? For a brother that she hadn’t seen in a dozen years—an’ which she knows in her secret heart wasn’t any good?” retorted Sanderson. “Shootin’ your face off in Okar—or anywhere else—don’t go any more,” added Sanderson. “She’s pretendin’, publicly, that I’m her brother.”

“I’m through talking,” declared Owen.

“Or livin’. It’s one or the other,” warned Sanderson.

Sanderson took the seven thousand dollars that Mary gave him, rode to Lazette—a town fifty miles eastward from the basin—and deposited the money in a bank there. Then he rode eastward still farther and in another town discovered a young engineer with a grievance against his employers.

The result of this discovery was that on the following morning the young engineer and Sanderson journeyed westward to the basin, arriving at the Double A late in the afternoon of the next day.

On the edge of the plateau after the engineer and Sanderson had spent three or four days prowling through the basin and the gorge, the engineer spoke convincingly:

“It’s the easiest thing in the world! A big flume to the point I showed you, a big main ditch and several laterals will do the trick. I’m with you to the finish!”

Sanderson smiled at the engineer’s glowing enthusiasm and told him of the opposition he would meet in developing the project.

“There’ll be a heap of schemin’, an’ mebbe shootin’, Williams,” Sanderson told him. “Puttin’ through this deal won’t be any pussy-kitten affair.”

“So much the better,” laughed the engineer; “I’m fed up on soft snaps and longing for action.”

The engineer was thirty; big, square-shouldered, lithe, and capable. He had a strong face and a level, steady eye.

“If you mean business, let’s get acquainted,” he said. “My front name is Kent.”

“Well, Kent, let’s get busy,” smiled Sanderson. “You go to work on your estimates, order your

material, hire your men. I'll see how bad the people in the basin want the water they've been expectin'."

Kent Williams took up his quarters in the bunk-house and immediately began work, though before he could do much he rode to Okar, telegraphed to Dry Bottom, the town which had been the scene of his previous activity, and awaited the arrival of several capable-looking young men.

In company with the latter he returned to the Double A, and for many days thereafter he and his men ran the transit and drove stakes in the basin and along the gorge.

Sanderson spent much of his time talking with the cattlemen in the basin. They were all eager to have water brought to their ranches, for it would save them the long trip to the river, which was inaccessible in many places, and they welcomed the new project.

One of the men—a newcomer to the basin—voiced the general sentiment.

"We want water, an' we don't give a damn who brings it here. First come, first served!"

The big problem to Sanderson, however, was the question of money. He was aware that a vast sum would be required. Nearly all the money he possessed would be sunk in the preliminary work, and

he knew that if the work was to go on he must borrow money.

He couldn't get money in Okar, he knew that. He rode to Lazette and talked with a banker there. The latter was interested, but unwilling to lend.

"The Okar Basin," he said. "Yes, I've heard about it. Great prospects there. But I've been told that Silverthorn and Maison are going to put it through, and until I hear from them, I shouldn't like to interfere."

"That gang won't touch the Double A water!" declared Sanderson. "I'll see the basin scorched to a cinder before I'll let them in on the deal!"

The banker smiled. "You are entitled to the water, of course; and I admire your grit. But those men are powerful. I have to depend on them a great deal. So you can see that I couldn't do anything without first consulting them."

Sanderson left Lazette in disgust. It was not until after he had tried in Dry Bottom and Las Vegas that he realized how subtle and far-reaching was the power and influence of the financial rulers of Okar.

"We should like to let you have the money," the Las Vegas banker told him. "But, unfortunately, a loan to you would conflict with our interests in Okar. We know the big men in Okar have been

considering the water question in the basin, and we should not like to antagonize them."

The trip consumed two weeks, and Sanderson returned to the Double A to discover that during his absence very little work had been done.

"It looks like we're up against it," Williams informed him when pressed for an explanation. "We can't get a pound of material. I went personally to Okar and was told by Silverthorn that the railroad would accept no material consigned to the Double A ranch."

"Pretty raw," was Sanderson's only comment.

"Raw? It's rotten!" declared Williams. "There's plenty of the kind of material we want in Lazette. To get it here would mean a fifty-mile haul. I can get teams and wagons in Lazette," he added, an eager note in his voice.

"Go to it," said Sanderson.

Williams smiled admiringly. "You're game, Mr. Man," he said; "it's a pleasure to work for you!"

However, it was not courage that impelled Sanderson to accept the hazard and expense of the fifty-mile haul. In his mind during the days he had been trying to borrow money had been a picture of the defeat that was ahead of him if he did not succeed; he could imagine the malicious satisfaction with which his three enemies would discuss his failure.

Inwardly, Sanderson was writhing with impatience and consumed with an eagerness to get into personal contact with his enemies; the passion to triumph had gripped his soul, and a contempt for the sort of law in which Okar dealt had grown upon him until the contemplation of it had aroused in him a savage humor.

Okar's law was not law at all; it was a convenience under which his three enemies could assail the property rights of others.

Outwardly, Sanderson was a smiling optimist. To Mary Bransford he confided that all was going well.

Neither had broached the subject of Sanderson's impersonation since the night of Dale's visit. It was a matter which certain thoughts made embarrassing for Mary, and Sanderson was satisfied to keep silent.

But on the day that Williams left the Double A for Lazette, Mary's curiosity could not be denied. She had conquered that constraint which had resulted from the revelation of Sanderson's identity, and had asked him to ride to the top of the gorge, telling him she wanted him to explain the proposed system of irrigation.

"It is desperately hard to get any information out of Williams," she told Sanderson; "he simply won't talk about the work."

“Meanin’ that he’ll talk rapid enough about other things, eh?” Sanderson returned. He looked slyly at Mary.

“What other things are there for him to talk about?”

“A man could find a heap of things to talk about—to a woman. He might talk about himself—or the woman,” suggested Sanderson, grinning.

She gave him a knowing look. “Oh,” she said, reddening. “Yes,” she added, smiling faintly; “now that you speak of it, I remember he did talk quite a little. He is a very interesting man.”

“Good-lookin’, too,” said Sanderson; “an’ smart. He saw the prospects of this thing right off.”

“Didn’t you see them?” she questioned quickly.

“Oh, that,” he said, flushing. “If the Drifter hadn’t told me mebbe I wouldn’t have seen.”

“You have always been around cattle, I suppose?” she asked.

“Raised with them,” smiled Sanderson.

Thus she directed the conversation to the subject about which she had wanted to inquire—his past life. Her questions were clever; they were suggestions to which he could do nothing except to return direct replies. And she got out of him much of his history, discovering that he had sound moral views, and a philosophy of which the salient principle was

the scriptural injunction: "Do unto others as ye would that others should do unto you."

Upon that principle he had founded his character. His reputation had grown out of an adamantine adherence to it. Looking at him now she felt the strength of him, his intense devotion to his ideals; the earnestness of him.

Curiously, she had felt those things during the time she had thought of him as her brother, and had been conscious of the lure of him. It gave her a queer thrill to stand beside him now, knowing that she had kissed him; that he had had an opportunity to take advantage of the situation, and had not done so.

He had acted the gentleman; he was a gentleman. That was why she was able to talk with him now. If he had not treated her as he had treated her his presence at the Double A would have been intolerable.

There was deep respect for women in Sanderson, she knew. Also, despite his bold, frank glances—which was merely the manhood of him challenging her and taking note of her charms—there was a hesitating bashfulness about the man, as though he was not quite certain of the impression he was creating in her mind.

That knowledge pleased Mary; it convinced her

of his entire worthiness; it gave her power over him—and that power thrilled her.

As her brother, he had been an interesting figure, though his manner had repelled her. And she had been conscious of a subtle pleasure that was not all sisterly when she had been near him. She knew, now, that the sensation had been instinctive, and she wondered if she could have felt toward her brother as she felt toward this man.

However, this new situation had removed the diffidence that had affected her; their relations were less matter of fact and more romantic, and she felt toward him as any woman feels who knows an admirer pursues her—breathless with the wonder of it, but holding aloof, tantalizing, whimsical, and uncertain of herself.

She looked at him challengingly, mockery in her eyes.

“So you came here because the Drifter told you there would be trouble—and a woman. How perfectly delightful!”

He sensed her mood and responded to it.

“It’s sure delightful. But it ain’t unusual. I’ve always heard that trouble will be lurkin’ around where there’s a woman.”

“But you would not say that a woman is not worth the trouble she causes?” she countered.

"A man is willin' to take her—trouble an' all," he responded, looking straight at her.

"Yes—if he can get her!" she shot back at him.

"Mostly every woman gets married to a man. I've got as good a chance as any other man."

"How do you know?"

"Because you're talkin' to me about it," he grinned. "If you wasn't considerin' me you wouldn't argue with me about it; you'd turn me down cold an' forget it."

"I suppose when a man is big and romantic-looking——"

"Oh, shucks, ma'am; you'll be havin' me gettin' a swelled head."

"He thinks that all he has to do is to look his best."

"I expect I've looked my worst since I've been here. I ain't had a chance to do any moonin' at you."

"I don't like men that 'moon,'" she declared.

"That's the reason I didn't do it," he said.

She laughed. "Now, tell me," she asked, "how you got your name, 'Deal.' It had something to do with cards, I suppose?"

"With weight," he said, looking soberly at her. "When I was born my dad looked at me sort of nonplussed. I was that big. 'There's a deal of him,'

he told my mother. An' the name stuck. That ain't a lot mysterious."

"It was a convenient name to attach the 'Square' to," she said.

"I've earned it," he said earnestly. "An' I've had a mighty hard time provin' my right to wear it. There's men that will tempt you out of pure deviltry, an' others that will try to shoot such a fancy out of your system. But I didn't wear the 'Square' because I wanted to—folks hung it onto me without me askin'. That's one reason I left Tombstone; I'd got tired of posin' as an angel."

He saw her face grow thoughtful and a haunting expression come into her eyes.

"You haven't told me how he looked," she said.

Sanderson lied. He couldn't tell her of the dissipation he had seen in her brother's face, nor of the evilness that had been stamped there. He drew a glowing picture of the man he had buried, and told her that had he lived her brother would have done her credit.

But Sanderson suffered no remorse over the lie. For he saw her eyes glow with pride, and he knew that the picture he had drawn would be the ideal of her memory for the future.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TRAIL HERD

KENT WILLIAMS went to Lazette, and Sanderson spent the interval during his departure and return in visiting the cattlemen and settlers in the basin. The result of these visits was a sheaf of contracts for water, the charge based on acreage, that reposed in Sanderson's pockets. According to the terms of the contracts signed by the residents of the basin, Sanderson was to furnish water within one year.

The length of time, Sanderson decided, would tell the story of his success or failure. If he failed he would lose nothing, because of having the contracts with the settlers, and if he won the contracts would be valid.

Sanderson was determined to win. When after an absence of a week Williams returned, to announce that he had made arrangements for the material necessary to make a "regular" start, and that he had hired men and teams to transport the material, Sanderson's determination became grim. For Williams told him that he had "gone the limit," which

meant that every cent to Sanderson's credit in the Lazette bank had been pledged to pay for the material the engineer had ordered.

"We're going to rush things from now on," Williams told Sanderson. "Next week we'll need ten thousand dollars, at least."

Sanderson went into the house and had a long talk with Mary Bransford. Coming out, he went to the corral, saddled Streak, and rode to Okar.

Shortly he was sitting at a desk opposite a little man who was the resident buyer for an eastern livestock company.

"The Double A has three thousand head of cattle," Sanderson told the little man. "They've had good grass and plenty of water. They're fat, and are good beef cattle. Thirty-three dollars is the market price. What will you give for them, delivered to your corral here?"

The resident buyer looked uncomfortable. "I've had orders not to buy any more cattle for a time."

"Whose orders?" demanded Sanderson.

The resident buyer's face flushed and he looked more uncomfortable.

"My firm's orders!" he snapped.

Sanderson laughed grimly; he saw guilt in the resident buyer's eyes.

"Silverthorn's orders," he said shortly. At the

other's emphatic negative Sanderson laughed again. "Maison's, then. Sure—Maison's," he added, as the other's flush deepened.

Sanderson got up. "Don't take it so hard," he advised the resident buyer. "I ain't goin' to bite you. What I'm wonderin' is, did Maison give you that order personally, or did you get it from your boss."

The buyer shifted uneasily in his chair, and did not look at Sanderson.

"Well," said the latter, "it don't make a heap of difference. Good-bye," he said, as he went out. "If you get to feelin' mighty small an' mean you can remember that you're only one of the pack of coyotes that's makin' this town a disgrace to a dog kennel."

Sanderson returned to the Double A and found Mary in the house.

"No go," he informed her. "Maison an' Silverthorn an' Dale have anticipated that move. We don't sell any cattle in Okar."

The girl's disappointment was deep.

"I suppose we may as well give up," she said.

Sanderson lifted her face to his.

"If you're goin' to talk that way I ain't goin' to love you like I thought I was," he grinned. "An' I'm sure wantin' to."

"I don't want to give up," she said.

"Meanin'?"

"Meaning that I'd like to have you beat those men. Oh, the miserable schemers! They will go to any length to defeat you."

He laughed lowly and vibrantly. "Well, they'll certainly have to travel *some*," he said. "About as fast as the man will have to travel that takes you away from me."

"Is victory that dear to you?" she asked.

"I won't take one without the other," he told her his eyes glowing. "If I don't beat Silverthorn and the others, an' keep the Double A for you, why I——"

"You'll win!" she said.

"You are hopin' I will?" he grinned. "Well," he added, as she averted her eyes, "there'll come a time when we'll talk real serious about that. I'm goin' to tell the range boss to get ready for a drive to Las Vegas."

"That is a hundred and seventy-five miles!" gasped the girl.

"I've followed a trail herd two thousand," grinned Sanderson.

"You mean that you will go yourself—with the outfit?"

"Sure."

Sanderson went out, mounted Streak, and found the range boss—Eli Carter. Carter and the men were ordered to round up all the Double A cattle and get ready to drive them to Las Vegas. Sanderson told Carter he would accompany the outfit.

Cutting across the basin toward the ranchhouse, he saw another horseman riding fast to intercept him, and he swerved Streak and headed toward the other.

The rider was Williams, and when Sanderson got close enough to see his face he noted that the engineer was pale and excited.

CHAPTER XVIII

CHECKED BY THE SYSTEM

THE engineer waved a yellow paper at Sanderson and shouted:

“I just got this. I made a hit with the Okar agent last week, and he sent a man over with it. That’s a damned scoundrelly bunch that’s working against you! Do you know what they’ve done?”

Sanderson said nothing, and the engineer resumed, explosively:

“They’ve tied up your money at the Lazette bank! My material men won’t send a pound of stuff to me until they get the cash! We’re stopped—dead still!”

He passed a telegram to Sanderson, who read:

Bank here refuses to honor Sanderson’s check. Claim money belongs to Bransford estate. Legal tangle. Must have cash or won’t send material.

THE BRANDER COMPANY.

A flicker of Sanderson’s eyelids was all the emotion he betrayed to Williams. The latter looked at him admiringly.

“By George,” he said, “you take it like a ma-

jor! In your shoes I'd get off my nag and claw up the scenery!"

Sanderson smiled. After telling the engineer to do as much as he could without the material, he rode on.

He had betrayed no emotion in the presence of Williams, but he was seething with passion.

Late the next afternoon he joined Carter and the outfit. The men had made good use of their time, and when Sanderson arrived, the entire herd of cattle was massed on a broad level near the river. They were milling impatiently, for the round-up had just been completed, and they were nervous over the unusual activity.

The cowboys, bronzed, lean, and capable, were guarding the herd, riding slowly around the fringe of tossing horns, tired, dusty, but singing their quaint songs.

Carter had sent the cook back to the ranchhouse during the afternoon to obtain supplies; and now the chuck wagon, with bulging sides, was standing near a fire at which the cook himself was preparing supper.

Carter grinned as Sanderson rode up.

"All ready!" he declared. "We sure did hump ourselves!"

Around the camp fire that night Sanderson was

moody and taciturn. He had stretched out on his blanket and lay listening to the men until one by one they dropped off to sleep.

Sanderson's thoughts were bitter. He felt the constricting influence of his enemies; he was like the herd of cattle that his men had rounded up that day, for little by little Silverthorn, Dale, and Maison were cutting down his area of freedom and of action, were hampering him on all sides, and driving him to a point where he would discover resistance to be practically useless.

He had thought in the beginning that he could devise some way to escape the meshes of the net that was being thrown around him, but he was beginning to realize that he had underestimated the power and the resources of his enemies.

Maison and Silverthorn he knew were mere tentacles of the capital they represented; it was their business to reach out, searching for victims, in order to draw them in and drain from them the last vestige of wealth.

And Sanderson had no doubt that they did that work impersonally and without feeling, not caring, and perhaps not understanding the tortures of a system—of a soulless organization seeking only financial gain.

Dale, however, was intensely human and individ-

ualistic. He was not as subtle nor as smooth as his confederates. And money was not the only incentive which would drive him to commit crime. He was a gross sensualist, unprincipled and ruthless, and Sanderson's hatred of him was beginning to overshadow every other consideration.

Sanderson went to sleep with his bitter thoughts, which were tempered with a memory of the gentle girl at whom the evil agencies of his enemies were directed. They were eager to get possession of Mary Bransford's property, but their real fight would be, and was, against him.

But it was Mary Bransford that he was fighting for, and if he could get the herd of cattle to Las Vegas and dispose of them, he would be provided with money enough to defeat his enemies. But money he must have.

At breakfast the next morning Carter selected the outfit for the drive. He named half a dozen men, who were variously known as Buck, Andy, Bud, Soapy, Sogun, and the Kid. These men were experienced trail-herd men, and Carter had confidence in them.

Their faces, as they prepared for the trip, revealed their joy and pride over their selection, while the others, disappointment in their eyes, plainly envied their fellow-companions.

But Sanderson lightened their disappointment by entrusting them with a new responsibility.

“You fellows go back to the Double A an’ hang around,” he told them. “I don’t care whether you do a lick of work or not. Stick close to the house an’ keep an eye on Mary Bransford. If Dale, or any of his gang, come nosin’ around, bore them, plenty! If any harm comes to Mary Bransford while I’m gone, I’ll salivate you guys!”

Shortly after breakfast the herd was on the move. The cowboys started them westward slowly, for trail cattle do not travel fast, urging them on with voice and quirt until the line stretched out into a sinuously weaving band a mile long.

They reached the edge of the big level after a time, and filed through a narrow pass that led upward to a table-land. Again, after a time, they took a descending trail, which brought them down upon a big plain of grassland that extended many miles in all directions. Fringing the plain on the north was a range of hills that swept back to the mountains that guarded the neck of the big basin at Okar.

There was timber on the hills, and the sky line was ragged with boulders. And so Sanderson and his men, glancing northward many times during the morning, did not see a rider who made his way through the hills.

During the previous afternoon the rider had sat on his horse in the dim haze of distance, watching the Double A outfit round up its cattle; and during the night he had stood on guard, watching the men around the camp fire.

He had seen most of the Double A men return toward the ranchhouse after the trail crew had been selected; he had followed the progress of the herd during the morning.

At noon he halted in a screen of timber and grinned felinely.

"They're off, for certain," he said aloud.

Late that afternoon the man was in Okar, talking with Dale and Silverthorn and Maison.

"What you've been expectin' has happened," he told them. "Sanderson, Carter, an' six men are on the move with a trail herd. They're headed straight on for Las Vegas."

Silverthorn rubbed the palms of his hands together, Maison smirked, and Dale's eyes glowed with satisfaction.

Dale got up and looked at the man who had brought the information.

"All right, Morley," he said with a grin. "Get going; we'll meet up with Sanderson at Bevil's Hole."

CHAPTER XIX

A QUESTION OF BRANDS

TRAILING a herd of cattle through a strange, wild country is no sinecure. There was not a man in the Double A outfit who expected an easy time in trailing the herd to Las Vegas, for it was a rough, grim country, and the men were experienced.

Wild cattle are not tractable; they have an irritating habit of obstinately insisting on finding their own trail, and of persisting in vagaries that are the despair of their escort.

The Double A herd was no exception. On a broad level they behaved fairly well, though always requiring the attention of the men; but in the broken sections of country through which they passed, heart-breaking effort was required of the men to keep them headed in the right direction.

The men of the outfit had little sleep during the first two days of the drive. Nights found them hot, tired, and dusty, but with no prospect of an uninterrupted sleep. Still there was no complaint.

On the third night, the herd having been driven

about forty miles, the men began to show the effects of their sleepless vigil.

They had bedded the herd down on a level between some hills, near a rocky ford over which the waters of a little stream trickled.

Buck and Andy were on their ponies, slowly circling the herd, singing to the cattle, talking to them, using all their art and persuasion to induce the herd to cease the restless "milling" that had begun with the effort to halt for the night.

Around the camp fire, which had been built at the cook's orders, were Sanderson, Carter, Bud, Sogun, Soapy, and the Kid. Carter stood at a little distance from the fire, watching the herd.

"That's a damned nervous bunch we've got, boys," he called to the other men. "I don't know when I've seen a flightier lot. It wouldn't take much to start 'em!"

"We'll have our troubles gettin' them through Devil's Hole," declared Soapy. Soapy, so called because of his aversion to the valuable toilet preparation so necessary to cleanliness, had a bland, ingenuous face and perplexed, inquiring eyes. He was a capable man, however, despite his pet aversion, and there was concern in his voice when he spoke.

"That's why I wasn't in no hurry to push them too far tonight," declared Carter. "I don't want

to get anywhere near Devil's Hole in the darkness; an' I want that place quite some miles away when I camp. I seen a herd strike that quicksand on a run once, an' they wasn't enough of them left to make a good stew.

"If my judgment ain't wrong, an' we can keep them steppin' pretty lively in the mornin', we'll get to Devil's Hole just about noon tomorrow. Then we can ease them through, an' the rest ain't worth talkin' about."

"Devil's Hole is the only trail?" inquired Sanderson.

Carter nodded. The others confirmed the nod.

But Carter's desire for an early start the next morning was denied. Bud and Sogun were on guard duty on the morning shift, with the other men at breakfast, when a dozen horsemen appeared from the morning haze westward and headed directly for the camp fire.

"Visitors," announced Soapy, who was first to see the riders.

The Double A men got to their feet to receive the strangers. Sanderson stepped out from the group slightly, and the horsemen came to a halt near him. A big man, plainly the leader of the strangers, dismounted and approached Sanderson.

The man radiated authority. There was a bel-

ligerent gleam in his eyes as he looked Sanderson over, an inspection that caused Sanderson's face to redden, so insolent was it. Behind him the big man's companions watched, their faces expressionless, their eyes alert.

"Who's runnin' this outfit?" demanded the man.

"You're talkin' at the boss," said Sanderson.

"I'm the sheriff of Colfax County," said the other, shortly. "There's been a complaint made about you. Bill Lester, of the Bar X, says you've been pickin' up his cattle, crossin' his range, yesterday."

This incident had happened before, both to Sanderson and to Carter. They had insisted on the right of inspection themselves, when strange herds had been driven through their ranges.

"We want to look your stock over," said the sheriff.

The request was reasonable, and Sanderson smiled.

"That's goin' to hold us up a spell," he returned; "an' we was figurin' on makin' Devil's Hole before dark. Hop in an' do your inspectin'."

The big man motioned to his followers and the latter spurred to the herd, the other being the last to leave the camp fire.

For two hours the strangers threaded and weaved their horses through the mass of cattle, while San-

derson and his men, impatient to begin the morning drive, rode around the outskirts and watched them.

"They're takin' a mighty good look," commented Carter at the end of the two hours.

Sanderson's face was set in a frown; he saw that the men were working very slowly, and were conferring together longer than seemed necessary.

At the end of three hours Carter spoke to Sanderson, his voice hoarse with rage:

"They're holdin' us up purposely. I'll be damned if I'm goin' to stand for it!"

"Easy there!" cautioned Sanderson. "I've never seen a sheriff that was long on speed. They'll be showin' their hand pretty soon."

Half an hour later the sheriff spurred his horse out of the press and approached Sanderson. His face was grave. His men rode up also, and halted their horses near him. The Double A men had advanced and stood behind Sanderson and Carter.

"There's somethin' wrong here!" he declared, scowling at Sanderson. "It ain't the first time this dodge has been worked. A man gets up a brand that's mighty like the brand on the range he's goin' to drive through, an' he picks up cattle an' claims they're his. You claim your brand is the Double A." He dismounted and with a branch of chaparral drew a design in the sand.

“ This is the way you make your brand,” he said, and he pointed out the Double A brand:

A

X

“ That’s an ‘A’ lookin’ at it straight up an’ from the right side, like this, just reversin’ it. But when you turn it this way, it’s the Bar X:

“An’ there’s a bunch of your steers with the brand on them that way. I’ll have to take charge of the herd until the thing is cleared up!”

Sanderson’s lips took on a straight line; the color left his face.

Here was authority—that law with which he had unaccountably clashed on several occasions during his stay at the Double A. Yet he knew that—as on those other occasions—the law was operating to the benefit of his enemies.

However, he did not now suspect Silverthorn and the others of setting the law upon him. The Double A men might have been careless with their branding, and it was unfortunate that he had been forced by the closing of the Okar market to drive his cattle over a range upon which were cattle bearing a brand so startlingly similar to his.

His men were silent, watching him with set faces. He knew they would stand behind him in any trouble that might occur. And yet he hesitated, for he did not wish to force trouble.

"How many Bar X cattle do you think are in the herd?" he asked.

"Mebbe a hundred—mebbe more."

"How long will it take you to get Bill Lester here to prove his stock?"

The big man laughed. "That's a question. Bill left last night for Frisco. I reckon mebbe he'll be gone a month—mebbe more."

The color surged back into Sanderson's face. He stiffened.

"An' you expect to hold my herd here until Lester gets back?" he said, slowly.

"Yep," said the other, shortly.

"You can't do it!" declared Sanderson. "I know the law, an' you can't hold a man's cattle that long without becomin' liable for damages."

"We'll be liable," grinned the sheriff. "Before Bill left last night he made out a bond for ninety thousand dollars—just what your cattle are worth at the market price. If there's any damages comin' to you you'll get them out of that."

"It's a frame-up," growled Carter, at Sanderson's side. "It proves itself. This guy, Lester,

makes out a bond before we're within two days' drive of his bailiwick. He's had information about us, an' is plannin' to hold us up. You know what for. Silverthorn an' the bunch has got a finger in the pie."

That suspicion had also become a conviction to Sanderson. And yet, in the person of the sheriff and his men, there was the law blocking his progress toward the money he needed for the irrigation project.

"Do you think one hundred and fifty heads will cover the suspected stock?" he questioned.

"I'd put it at two hundred," returned the sheriff.

"All right, then," said Sanderson slowly; "take your men an' cut out the two hundred you think belong to Lester. I'll stop on the way back an' have it out with you."

The sheriff grinned. "That'll be square enough," he agreed. He turned to the men who had come with him. "You boys cut out them cattle that we looked at, an' head them toward the Bar X." When the men had gone he turned to Sanderson.

"I want you men to know that I'm actin' under orders. I don't know what's eatin' Bill Lester—that ain't my business. But when I'm ordered to do anything in my line of duty, why, it's got to be done. Your friend has gassed some about a man

named Silverthorn bein' at the bottom of this thing. Mebbe he is—I ain't got no means of knowin'. It appears to me that Bill ain't got no call to hog your whole bunch, though, for I've never knowed Bill to raise more than fifteen hundred head of cattle in one season. I'm takin' a chance on two hundred coverin' his claims."

It was after noon when the sheriff and his men started westward with the suspected stock.

Carter, fuming with rage, watched them go. Then he turned to Sanderson.

"Hell an' damnation! We'll hit Devil's Hole about dusk—if we start now. What'll we do?"

"Start," said Sanderson. "If we hang around here for another day they'll trump up another fake charge an' clean us out!"

The country through which they were forced to travel during the afternoon was broken and rugged, and the progress of the herd was slow. However, according to Carter, they made good time considering the drawbacks they encountered, and late afternoon found them within a few miles of the dreaded Devil's Hole.

Carter counseled a halt until morning, and Sanderson yielded. After a camping ground had been selected Carter and Sanderson rode ahead to inspect Devil's Hole.

The place was well named. It was a natural basin between some jagged and impassable foothills, running between a gorge at each end. Both ends of the basin constricted sharply at the gorges, resembling a wide, narrow-necked bottle.

A thin stream of water flowed on each side of a hard, rock trail that ran straight through the center of the basin, and on both sides of the trail a black bog of quicksand spread, covering the entire surface of the land.

Halfway through the basin, Sanderson halted Streak on the narrow trail and looked at the treacherous sand.

"I've seen quicksand, *an'* quicksand," he declared, "but this is the boss of the lot. If any steers get bogged down in there they wouldn't be able to bellow more than once before they'd sink out of sight!"

"There's a heap of them in there," remarked Carter.

It was an eery place, and the echo of their voices resounded with ever-increasing faintness.

"I never go through this damned hell-hole without gettin' the creeps," declared Carter. "An' I've got nerve enough, too, usually. There's somethin' about the place that suggests the cattle an' men it's swallowed.

“Do you see that flat section there?” he indicated a spot about a hundred yards wide and half as long, which looked like hard, baked earth, black and dead. “That’s where that herd I was tellin’ you about went in. The next morning you couldn’t see hide nor hair of them.

“It’s a fooler for distance, too,” he went on; “it’s more than a mile to that little spot of rock, that projectin’ up, over there. College professors have been here, lookin’ at it, an’ they say the thing is fed from underground rivers, or springs, or somethin’ that they can’t even guess.

“One of them was tellin’ Ross Edwards, over on the Cimarron, that that rock point that you see projectin’ up was the peak of a mountain, an’ that this narrow trail we’re on is the back of a ridge that used to stick up high an’ mighty above a lot of other things.

“I can’t make it out, an’ I don’t try; it’s here, an’ that’s all there is to it. An’ I ain’t hangin’ around it any longer than I have to.”

“A stampede—” began Sanderson.

“Gentlemen, shut up!” interrupted Carter. “If any cattle ever come through here, stampedin’, that herd wouldn’t have enough left of it to supply a road runner’s breakfast!”

They returned to the camp, silent and anxious.

CHAPTER XX

DEVIL'S HOLE

SANDERSON took his turn standing watch with the other men. The boss of a trail herd cannot be a shirker, and Sanderson did his full share of the work.

Tonight he had the midnight shift. At two o'clock he would ride back to camp, awaken his successor, and turn in to sleep until morning.

Because of the proximity of the herd to Devil's Hole an extra man had been told off for the night-watch, and Soapy and the Kid were doing duty with Sanderson.

Riding in a big circle, his horse walking, Sanderson could see the dying embers of the camp fire glowing like a big firefly in the distance. A line of trees fringing the banks of the river near the camp made a dark background for the tiny, leaping sparks that were shot up out of the fire, and the branches waving in the hazy light from countless coldly glittering stars were weird and foreboding.

Across the river the ragged edges of the rock buttes that flanked the water loomed somberly;

beyond them the peaks of some mountains, miles distant, glowed with the subdued radiance of a moon that was just rising.

Back in the direction from which the herd had come the ridges and depressions stretched, in irregular corrugations, as far as Sanderson could see. Southward were more mountains, dark and mysterious.

Riding his monotonous circles, Sanderson looked at his watch, his face close to it, for the light from the star-haze was very dim. He was on the far side of the herd, toward Devil's Hole, and he was chanting the refrain from a simple cowboy song as he looked at the watch.

The hands of the timepiece pointed to "one." Thus he still had an hour to stand watch before awakening the next man. He placed the watch in a pocket, shook the reins over Streak's neck and spoke to him.

"Seems like old times to be ridin' night-watch, eh, Streak?" he said.

The words had hardly escaped his lips when there arose a commotion from the edge of the herd nearest the corrugated land that lay between the herd and the trail back to the Double A.

On a ridge near the cattle a huge, black, grotesque shape was clearly outlined. It was waving to and

fro, as though it were some giant-winged monster of the night trying to rise from the earth. Sanderson could hear the flapping noise it made; it carried to him with the sharp resonance of a pistol shot.

“Damnation!” he heard himself say. “Some damned fool is wavin’ a tarp!”

He jerked Streak up shortly, intending to ride for the point where the tarpaulin was being waved before it was too late. But as he wheeled Streak he realized that the havoc had been wrought, for the cattle nearest him were on their feet, snorting with fright—a sensation that had been communicated to them by contact with their fellows in the mass.

At the point where the commotion had occurred was confusion. Sanderson saw steers rising on their hind legs, throwing their forelegs high in the air; they were bellowing their fright and charging against the steers nearest them, frenziedly trying to escape the danger that seemed to menace them.

Sanderson groaned, for the entire herd was on the move! Near at hand a dozen steers shot out of the press and lumbered past him, paying no attention to his shouts. He fired his pistol in the face of one, and though the animal tried to turn back, frightened by the flash, the press of numbers behind it, already moving forward, forced it again to wheel and break for freedom.

Sanderson heard the sounds of pistol shots from the direction of the camp fire; he heard other shots from the direction of the back trail; he saw the forms of men on horses darting here and there on the opposite side of the herd from where he rode.

From the left side of the herd came another rider — Soapy. He tore ahead of the vanguard of running steers, shooting his pistol in their faces, shouting profanely at them, lashing them with his quirt.

A first batch slipped by him. He spurred his horse close to Sanderson — who was trying to head off still others of the herd that were determined to follow the first — and cursed loudly:

“ Who in hell waved that tarp? ”

Sanderson had no time to answer. A score of steers bolted straight for him, and he groaned again when he saw that the whole herd was rushing forward in a mass. A common impulse moved them; they were frenzied with fright and terror.

It was not the first stampede that Sanderson had been in, and he knew its dangers. Yet he grimly fought with the cattle, Streak leaping here and there in answer to the knee-pressure of his master, horse and rider looking like knight and steed of some fabled romance, embattled with a huge monster with thousands of legs.

Sanderson caught a glimpse of several riders tear-

ing toward him from the direction of the camp, and he knew that Carter and the others were trying to reach him in the hope of being able to stem the torrent of rushing cattle.

But the movement had already gone too far, and the speed of the frenzied steers was equal to the best running that Streak could do.

Sanderson saw that all effort to stop them would be hopeless, and aware of the danger of remaining at the head of the flying mass, he veered Streak off, heading him toward the side, out of the press.

As he rode he caught a glimpse of Soapy. The latter had the same notion that was in Sanderson's mind, for he was leaning over his pony's mane, riding hard to get out of the path taken by the herd.

Sanderson pulled Streak up slightly, watching Soapy until he was certain the latter would reach the edge, then he gave Streak the reins again.

The pause, though, robbed Sanderson of his chance to escape. He had been cutting across the head of the herd at a long angle when watching Soapy, and had been traveling with the cattle also; and now he saw that the big level was behind him, that he and the cattle were in an ever-narrowing valley which led directly into the neck of Devil's Hole.

Sanderson now gave up all hope of reaching the side, and devoted his attention to straight, hard rid-

ing. There were a few steers ahead of him, and he had a faint hope that if he could get ahead of them he might be able to direct their course through Devil's Hole and thus avert the calamity that threatened.

Grimly, silently, riding as he had never ridden before, he urged Streak forward. One by one he passed the steers in his path, and just before he reached the entrance to Devil's Hole he passed the foremost steer.

Glancing back as Streak thundered through the neck of the Hole, Sanderson saw Soapy coming, not more than a hundred yards behind. Soapy had succeeded in getting clear of the great body of steers, but there were a few still running ahead of him, and he was riding desperately to pass them.

Just as Sanderson looked back he saw Soapy's horse stumble. He recovered, ran a few steps and stumbled again. This time he went to one knee. He tried desperately to rise, fell again, and went down, neighing shrilly in terror.

Sanderson groaned and tried to pull Streak up. But the animal refused to heed the pull on the reins and plunged forward, unheeding.

There would have been no opportunity to save Soapy, even if Streak had obeyed his master. The first few steers at the head of the mass swerved

around the fallen man and his horse, for they could see him.

The thousands behind, though, running blindly, in the grip of the nameless terror that had seized them, saw nothing, heeded nothing, and they swept, in a smother of dust, straight over the spot where Soapy and his horse had been.

White-lipped, catching his breath in gasps over the horror, Sanderson again turned his back to the herd and raced on. The same accident might happen to him, but there was no time to pick and choose his trail.

Behind him, with the thundering noise of a devastating avalanche, the herd came as though nothing had happened. The late moon that had been touching the peaks of the far mountains now lifted a rim over them, flooding the world with a soft radiance. Sanderson had reached the center of the trail, through Devil's Hole, before he again looked back.

What he saw caused him to pull Streak up with a jerk. The head of the herd had burst through the entrance to the Hole, and, opening fanlike, had gone headlong into the quicksand.

Fascinated with the magnitude of the catastrophe, Sanderson paid no attention to the few steers that went past him, snorting wildly; he sat rigid on his horse and watched the destruction of the herd.

A great mass of steers had gone into the quicksand at the very edge of the Hole; they formed a foothold for many others that, forced on by the impetus of the entire mass, crushed them down, trampled them further into the sand, and plunged ahead to their own destruction.

It was a continually recurring incident. Mad-dened, senseless, unreasoning in their panic, the mass behind came on, a sea of tossing horns, a maelstrom of swirling, blinding dust and heaving bodies into the mire; the struggling, enmeshed bodies of the vanguard forming a living floor, over which each newcomer swept to oblivion.

Feeling his utter helplessness, Sanderson continued to watch. There was nothing he could do; he was like a mere atom of sand on a seashore, with the storm waves beating over him.

The scene continued a little longer. Sanderson saw none of the men of the outfit. The dust died down, settling like a pall over the neck of the Hole.

A few steers, chancing to come straight ahead through the neck of the Hole, and thus striking the hard, narrow trail that ran through the center, continued to pass Sanderson. They were still in the grip of a frenzy; and at the far end of the Hole he saw a number of them bogged down. They had not learned the lesson of the first entrance.

At length it seemed to be over. Sanderson saw one steer, evidently with some conception of the calamity penetrating its consciousness, standing near him on the trail, moving its head from side to side and snorting as it looked at its unfortunate fellows. The animal seemed to be unaware of Sanderson's presence until Streak moved uneasily.

Then the steer turned to Sanderson, its red eyes ablaze. As though it blamed him for the catastrophe, it charged him. Sanderson drew his pistol and shot it, with Streak rearing and plunging.

Roars of terror and bellows of despair assailed Sanderson's ears from all directions. Groans, almost human, came from the mired mass on both sides of the trail. Hundreds of the cattle had already sunk from sight, hundreds were sucked partly down, and other hundreds—thousands, it seemed—were struggling in plain view, with only portions of their bodies under.

Still others—the last to pour through the throat of the gorge—were clambering out, using the sinking bodies of others to assist them; Sanderson could see a few more choking the far end of the Hole.

How many had escaped he did not know, nor care. The dramatic finish of Soapy was vivid, and concern for the other members of the outfit was uppermost in his mind.

He rode the back trail slowly. The destruction of his herd had not occupied ten minutes, it seemed. Dazed with the suddenness of it, and with a knowledge of what portended, he came to the spot where Soapy's horse had stumbled and looked upon what was left of the man. His face dead white, his hands trembling, he spread his blanket over the spot. He had formed an affection for Soapy.

Mounting Streak, he resumed his ride toward the camp. A dead silence filled the wide level from which the stampede had started—a silence except for the faint bellowing that still reached his ears from the direction of the Hole.

Half a mile from where he had found the pitiable remnants of Soapy he came upon Carter. The range boss was lying prone on his back, his body apparently unmarred. His horse was standing near him, grazing. Carter had not been in the path of the herd.

What, then, had happened to him?

Sanderson dismounted and went to his knees beside the man. At first he could see no sign of anything that might have caused death—for Carter was undoubtedly dead—and already stiffening! Then he saw a red patch staining the man's shirt, and he examined it. Carter had been shot.

Sanderson stood up and looked around. There

was no one in sight. He mounted Streak and began to ride toward the camp, for he felt that Carter's death had resulted from an accident. One explanation was that a stray bullet had killed Carter—in the excitement of a stampede the men were apt to shoot wildly at refractory steers.

But the theory of accident did not abide. Halfway between Carter and the camp Sanderson came upon Bud. Bud was lying in a huddled heap. He had been shot from behind. Later, continuing his ride to camp, Sanderson came upon the other men.

He found the Kid and the cook near the chuck wagon, Sogun and Andy were lying near the fire, whose last faint embers were sputtering feebly; Buck was some distance away, but he, too, was dead!

Sanderson went from one to the other of the men, to make a final examination. Bending over Sogun, he heard the latter groan, and in an instant Sanderson was racing to the river for water.

He bathed Sogun's wound—which was low on the left side, under the heart, and, after working over him for five or ten minutes, giving him whisky from a flask he found in the chuck wagon, and talking to the man in an effort to force him into consciousness, he was rewarded by seeing Sogun open his eyes.

Sogun looked perplexedly at Sanderson, whose face was close.

There was recognition in Sogun's eyes—the calm of reason was swimming in them.

He half smiled. “So you wriggled out of it, boss, eh? It was a clean-up, for sure. I seen them get the other boys. I emptied my gun, an’ was filin’ her again when they got me.”

“Who?” demanded Sanderson sharply.

“Dale an’ his gang. They was a bunch of them—twenty, mebbe. I heard them while I was layin’ here. They thought they’d croaked me, an’ they wasn’t botherin’ with me.

“One of them waved a blanket—or a tarp. I couldn’t get what it was. Anyway, they waved some-thin’ an’ got the herd started. I heard them talkin’ about seein’ Soapy go under, right at the start. An’ you. Dale said he saw you go down, an’ it wasn’t no use to look for you. They sure played hell, boss.”

Sanderson did not answer.

“If you’d lift my head a little higher, boss, I’d feel easier, mebbe,” Sogun smiled feebly. “An’ if it ain’t too much trouble I’d like a little more of that water—I’m powerful thirsty.”

Sanderson went to the river, and when he returned Sogun was stretched out on his back, his face up-turned with a faint smile upon it.

Sanderson knelt beside him, lifted his head and spoke to him. But Sogun did not answer.

Sanderson rose and stood with bowed head for a long time, looking down at Sogun. Then he mounted Streak and headed him into the moonlit space that lay between the camp and the Double A ranchhouse.

It was noon the next day when Sanderson returned with a dozen Double A men. After they had labored for two hours the men mounted their horses and began the return trip, one of them driving the chuck wagon.

All of the men were bitter against Dale for what had happened, and several of them were for instant reprisal.

But Sanderson stared grimly at them.

"There ain't any witnesses," he said, "not a damned one! My word don't go in Okar. Besides, it's my game, an' I'm goin' to play her a lone hand—as far as Dale is concerned."

"You goin' to round up what's left of the cattle?" asked a puncher.

Sanderson answered shortly: "Not any. There wasn't enough left to make a fuss about, an' Dale can have them."

CHAPTER XXI

A MAN BORROWS MONEY

THE incident of Devil's Hole had changed the character of the fighting between Sanderson and Dale. Dale and his fellow-conspirators had deserted that law upon which, until the incident of Devil's Hole, they had depended. They had resorted to savagery, to murder; they had committed themselves to a course that left Sanderson no choice except to imitate them.

And Sanderson was willing. More, he was anxious. He had respected the law; and still respected it. But he had never respected the law represented by his three enemies. He was determined to avenge the murder of his men, but in his own time and in his own way.

His soul was in the grip of a mighty rage against Dale and the others; he longed to come into personal contact with them—to feel them writhe and squirm in his clutch. And had he been the free agent he had always been until his coming to the Double A he would have gone straight to Okar, thus yielding to the blood lust that swelled his veins.

But he could not permit his inclinations to ruin the girl he had promised to protect. He could kill Dale, Silverthorn, and Maison quite easily. But he would have no defense for the deed, and the law would force him to desert Mary Bransford.

For an entire day following the return of himself and his men from the scene of the stampede Sanderson fought a terrific mental battle. He said nothing to Mary Bransford, after giving her the few bare facts that described the destruction of the herd. But the girl watched him anxiously, suspecting something of the grim thoughts that tortured him, and at dinner she spoke to him.

"Deal," she said, "don't be rash. Those men have done a lawless thing, but they still have the power to invoke the law against you."

"I ain't goin' to be lawless—yet," he grinned.

But Sanderson was yielding to an impulse that had assailed him. His manner betrayed him to Owen, at least, who spoke to Mary about it.

"He's framing up something—or he's got it framed up and is ready to act," he told the girl. "He has got that calm during the past few hours that I feel like I'm in the presence of an iceberg when I'm near him."

Whatever was on Sanderson's mind he kept to himself. But late that night, when the ranchhouse

was dark, and a look through one of the windows of the bunkhouse showed Sanderson there were only two men awake—and they playing cards sleepily—he threw saddle and bridle on Streak and rode away into the inky darkness of the basin.

Shortly after dusk on the same night Silverthorn, Dale, and Maison were sitting at a table in Maison's private office in the bank building. They, too, were playing cards.

But their thoughts were not on the cards. Elation filled their hearts.

Dale was dealing, but it was plain that he took no interest in the game. At last, with a gesture of disgust, he threw the cards face up on the table and smiled at the others.

“What's the use?” he said. “I keep thinking of what happened at Devil's Hole. We ought to have been sure that we finished the job, an' we would have been sure if we hadn't known that that damned Colfax sheriff was hanging around somewhere.

“He took two hundred head from Sanderson—when he ought to have taken the whole damn herd—which he'd orders to do. And then, instead of driving them direct to Lester's he made camp just on the other side of Devil's Hole—three or four miles, Morley said. I don't know what for, except that

maybe he's decided to give Sanderson the steers he'd taken from him—the damned fool! You've got to break him, Maison, for disobeying orders!"

"I'll attend to him," said Maison.

"That's the reason we didn't go through Devil's Hole to see what had become of Sanderson," resumed Dale. "We was afraid of running into the sheriff, and him, being the kind of a fool he is, would likely have wanted to know what had happened. I thought it better to sneak off without letting him see us than to do any explaining."

Silverthorn looked at his watch. "Morley and the others ought to be here pretty soon," he said.

"They're late as it is," grumbled Dale. "I ought to have gone myself."

They resumed their card-playing. An hour or so later there came a knock on the door of the bank—a back door—and Dale opened it to admit Morley—the big man who had drawn a pistol on Sanderson when he had tried to take Barney Owen out of the City Hotel barroom.

Morley was alone. He stepped inside without invitation and grinned at the others.

"There's no sign of Sanderson. Someone had been there an' planted the guys we salivated—an' the guy which went down in the run. We seen his horse layin' there, cut to ribbons. It's likely San-

derson went into the sand ahead of the herd—they was crowdin' him pretty close when we seen them runnin'."

"You say them guys was planted?" said Dale. "Then Sanderson got out of it. He would—if anyone could; for he was riding like a devil on a cyclone when I saw him. He's got back, and took his men to Devil's Hole."

Maison laughed. "We'll say he got out of it. What of it? He's broke. And if the damned court would get a move on with that evidence we've sent over to prove that he isn't a Bransford, we'd have the Double A inside of a week!"

Dale got up, grinning and looking at his watch.

"Well, gentlemen, I'm hitting the breeze to the Bar D for some sleep. See you tomorrow."

Dale went out and mounted his horse. But he did not go straight home, as he had declared he would. After striking the neck of the basin he swerved his horse and rode northeastward toward Ben Nyland's cabin.

For he had heard that day in Okar that Ben Nyland had taken a train eastward that morning, to return on the afternoon of the day following. And during the time Dale had been talking with Maison and Silverthorn, and playing cards with them, he thought often of Peggy Nyland.

Silverthorn and Morley did not remain long in Maison's private room in the bank building.

Morley had promised to play cards with some of his men in the City Hotel barroom, and he joined them there, while Silverthorn went to his rooms in the upper story of the station.

After the departure of the others, Maison sat for a long time at the table in the private room, making figures on paper.

Maison had exacted from the world all the luxuries he thought his pampered body desired. His financial career would not have borne investigation, but Maison's operations had been so smooth and subtle that he had left no point at which an enemy could begin an investigation.

But years of questionable practice had had an inevitable effect upon Maison. Outwardly, he had hardened, but only Maison knew of the many devils his conscience created for him.

Continued communion with the devils of conscience had made a coward of Maison. When at last he got up from the table he glanced apprehensively around the room; and after he had put out the light and climbed the stairs to his rooms above the bank, he was trembling.

Maison had often dealt crookedly with his fellow-men, but never, until the incident of Devil's Hole,

had he deliberately planned murder. Thus tonight Maison's conscience had more ghastly evidence to confront him with, and conscience is a pitiless retributive agent.

Maison poured himself a generous drink of whisky from a bottle on a sideboard before he got into bed, but the story told him by Dale and the others—of the terrible scene at Devil's Hole—remained so staringly vivid in his thoughts that whisky could not dim it.

He groaned and pulled the covers over his head. squirming and twisting, for the night was warm and there was little air stirring.

After a while Maison sat up. It seemed to him that he had been in bed for an age, though actually the time was not longer than an hour.

It had been late when he had left the room downstairs. And now he listened for sounds that would tell him that Okar's citizens were still busy with their pleasures.

But no sound came from the street. Maison yearned for company, for he felt unaccountably depressed and morbid. It was as though some danger impended and instinct was warning him of it.

But in the dead silence of Okar there was no suggestion of sound. It must have been in the ghostly hours between midnight and the dawn—though a

cold terror that had gripped Maison would not let him get up to look at the clock that ticked monotonously on the sideboard.

He lay, clammy with sweat, every sense strained and acute, listening. For, from continued contemplation of imaginary dangers he had worked himself into a frenzy which would have turned into a conviction of real danger at the slightest sound near him.

He expected sound to come; he waited for it, his ears attuned, his senses alert.

And at last sound came.

It was a mere creak—such a sound as a foot might make on a stairway. And it seemed to have come from the stairs leading to Maison's rooms.

He did not hear it again, though, and he might have fought off the new terror that was gripping him, if at that instant he had not remembered that when leaving the lower room he had forgotten to lock the rear door—the door through which Morley had entered earlier in the evening; the door through which Silverthorn had departed.

He had not locked that door, and that noise on the stairs might have been made by some night prowler.

Aroused to desperation by his fears he started to get out of bed with the intention of getting the revolver that lay in a drawer in the sideboard.

His feet were on the floor as he sat on the edge of

the bed preparatory to standing, when he saw the door at the head of the stairs slowly swing open and a figure of a man appear in the opening.

The light in the room was faint—a mere luminous star-mist—but Maison could see clearly the man's face. He stiffened, his hands gripping the bedclothing, as he muttered hoarsely:

“Sanderson!”

Sanderson stepped into the room and closed the door. The heavy six-shooter in his hand was at his hip, the long barrel horizontal, the big muzzle gaping forebodingly into Maison's face. There was a cold, mirthless grin on Sanderson's face, but it seemed to Maison that the grin was the wanton expression of murder lust.

He knew, without Sanderson telling him, that if he moved, or made the slightest outcry, Sanderson would kill him.

Therefore he made neither move nor sound, but sat there, rigid and gasping for breath, awaiting the other's pleasure.

Sanderson came close to him, speaking in a vibrant whisper:

“Anyone in the house with you? If you speak above a whisper I'll blow you apart!”

“I'm alone!” gasped Maison.

Sanderson laughed lowly. “You must have known

I was comin'. Did you expect me? Well—" when Maison did not answer—"you left the rear door open. Obligated to you.

"You know what I came for? No?" His voice was still low and vibrant. "I came to talk over what happened at Devil's Hole."

Maison's eyes bulged with horror.

"I see you know about it, all right. I'm glad of that. Seven men murdered; three thousand head of cattle gone. Mebbe they didn't all go into the quicksand—I don't know. What I do know is this: they've got to be paid for—men an' cattle. Understand? Cattle *an'* men."

The cold emphasis he laid on the "and" made a shiver run over the banker.

"Money will pay for cattle," went on Sanderson. "I'll collect a man for every man you killed at Devil's Hole."

He laughed in feline humor when Maison squirmed at the words.

"You think your life is more valuable than the life of any one of the men you killed at Devil's Hole, eh? Soapy was worth a hundred like you! An' Sogun—an' all the rest! Understand? They were real men, doin' some good in the world. I'm tellin' you this so you'll know that I don't think you amount to a hell of a lot, an' that I wouldn't suffer a heap

with remorse if you'd open your trap for one little peep an' I'd have to blow your guts out!"

A devil of conscience had finally visited Maison — a devil in the flesh. For all the violent passions were aflame in Sanderson's face, repressed but needing only provocation to loose them.

Maison knew what impended. But he succeeded in speaking, though the words caught, stranglingly, in his throat:

"W-what do you—want?"

"Ninety thousand dollars. The market price for three thousand head of cattle."

"There isn't that much in the vaults!" protested Maison in a gasping whisper. "We never keep that amount of money on hand."

He would have said more, but he saw Sanderson's grin become bitter; saw the arm holding the six-shooter stiffen suggestively.

Maison raised his hands in horror.

"Wait!" he said, pleadingly. "I'll see. Good God, man, keep the muzzle of that gun away!"

"Ninety thousand will do it," Sanderson grimly told him, "ninety thousand. No less. You can ask that God you call on so reckless to have ninety thousand in the vault when you go to look for it, right away.

"Get up an' dress!" he commanded.

He stood silently watching the banker as the latter got into his clothing. Then, with a wave of his gun in the direction of the stairs he ordered Maison to precede him. He kept close to the banker in the darkness of the rooms through which they passed, and finally when they reached the little room into which opened the big doors of the vault—embedded in solid masonry—Sanderson again spoke:

“I want it in bills of large denomination.” The banker was on his knees before the doors, working at the combination, and he looked around in silent objection at Sanderson’s voice.

“Big ones, I said,” repeated the latter. “You’ve got them. I was in Silverthorn’s rooms some hours ago, lookin’ over his books an’ things. I saw a note there, showin’ that he’d deposited fifty thousand here the day before yesterday. The note said it was cash. You’ll have forty thousand more. If you ain’t got it you’ll wish you had.”

Maison had it. He drew it out in packages—saffron-hued notes that he passed back to Sanderson reluctantly. When he had passed back the exact amount he looked around.

Sanderson ordered him to close the doors, and with the banker preceding him they returned to the upper room, where Sanderson distributed the money over his person securely, the banker watching him.

When Sanderson had finished, he again spoke. There was elation in his eyes, but they still were aflame with the threat of death and violence.

“Who’s the biggest an’ most honest man in town?” he said, “the one man that the folks here always think of when they’re in trouble an’ want a square deal? Every town always has such a man. Who is he?”

“Judge Graney,” said Maison.

“All right,” declared Sanderson. “We’ll go see Judge Graney. You’re goin’ to lead me to the place where he lives. We’re goin’ to have him witness that you’ve paid me ninety thousand dollars for the stock you destroyed—my cattle. He’s goin’ to be all the law I’m goin’ to depend on—in this case. After a while—if you sneaks go too strong—I’ll let loose a little of my own law—the kind I’ve showed you tonight.

“You’re goin’ to Judge Graney’s place, an’ you’re goin’ to sign a paper showin’ you paid me the money for my cattle. You ain’t goin’ to make any noise on the way, or to Judge Graney. You’re goin’ to do the talkin’ an’ tell Graney that you want him to witness the deal. An’ you’re goin’ to do it without him gettin’ wise that I’m forcin’ you. You’ll have to do some actin’, an’ if you fall down on this job you’ll never have to act again! Get goin’!”

Maison was careful not to make any noise as he went down the stairs; he was equally careful when he reached the street.

In a short time, Sanderson walking close behind him, he halted at a door of a private dwelling. He knocked on the door, and a short, squat man appeared in the opening, holding a kerosene lamp in one hand and a six-shooter in the other.

He recognized Maison instantly and politely asked him and his visitor inside. There Maison stated his business, and the judge, though revealing some surprise that so big a transaction should be concluded at so uncommon an hour, attested the paper made out by Maison, and signed the receipt for ninety thousand dollars written by Sanderson and given to the banker. Then, still followed by Sanderson, the banker went out.

There was no word spoken by either of the men until they again reached the bank building. Then it was Sanderson who spoke.

“That’s all, Maison,” he said. “Talk, if you must—mebbe it’ll keep you from explodin’. But if there’s any more meddlin’ with my affairs—by you—I’m comin’ for you again. An’ the next time it’ll be to make you pay for my men!”

He slipped behind the bank building and was gone. A little later, still standing where Sanderson had

left him, he saw the Double A man riding swiftly across country toward the neck of the basin.

Maison went slowly upstairs, lighted a lamp, and looked at his reflection in a glass. He sighed, blew out the light, got into bed and stretched out in relief, feeling that he had got out of the affair cheaply enough, considering all things.

And remembering what Sanderson had told him about returning, he determined that if Judge Graney said nothing of the occurrence he would never mention it. For he did not want Sanderson to pay him another visit.

CHAPTER XXII

A MAN FROM THE ABYSS

AT ABOUT the time Sanderson was entering Okar, Alva Dale was letting himself into the door of his office at the Bar D ranchhouse.

Dale's thoughts, because of the sensuous longing with which he had always looked upon Peggy Nyland, had become abysmal. Silverthorn had warned him that the dragging of a woman into the plot would be fatal to their aims, but Dale had paid no heed to Silverthorn. During the day he had kept thinking of the girl until now he could no longer restrain himself. His face was bestial with passion as he entered his office.

Inside the office he lighted a lamp and seated himself at his desk. There, with a pair of shears and a piece of black cloth, he fashioned a mask. He donned the mask and peered at himself in a mirror, grinning with satisfaction over the reflection. Had he not known himself for Alva Dale he would have been fooled by the covering.

Working swiftly, he changed his clothes. Then, after again looking at his reflection, he put out the

light, stepped outside, locked the door, and mounted his horse.

Riding a ridge above a shallow arroyo he came upon a little level near a grove of cottonwood trees. He circled one side of the grove, and in a clearing he saw the Nyland cabin.

He had visited the cabin before, but never had he felt about it as he felt at this moment. There had always been the presence of Ben Nyland to dampen the romantic thoughts that had beset him—for there had been a time when—if Peggy Nyland had been willing—he would have married her.

That time had passed. Dale grinned wickedly as he dismounted and walked forward.

There was no light showing in any of the windows, and Dale stepped stealthily to the rear door and knocked.

There was no answer; and Dale repeated the blows. Then he grinned with delight as he heard Peggy's voice, high-pitched and startled, saying:

“Who's there?”

“It's me—Sanderson,” he returned. “I've come for you!”

“What for?” This time there was alarm in the girl's voice, and Dale heard her walk across the floor and halt at the door. He mentally visualized her, standing there, one ear against the panel.

“ Didn’t they tell you? ” he said in a hoarse voice, into which he succeeded in getting much pretended anger. “ Why, I sent a man over here with word.”

“ Word about what? ”

Dale heard the girl fumbling at the fastenings of the door, and he knew that his imitation of Sander-son’s voice had deceived her.

“ Word that Ben was hurt,” he lied. “ The east train hit him as it was pullin’ in. He’s bad off, but the doc says he’ll come around if he gets good nursin’, an’ that’s why I’ve come——”

While he was talking the door burst open and Peggy appeared in the opening, her eyes wide with concern and eagerness.

She had heard Dale’s first knock on the door, and knowing it was someone for her—perhaps Ben returning—she had begun to dress, finishing—except for her shoes and stockings—by the time she opened the door.

In the dim light she did not at first see the mask on Dale’s face, and she was insistently demanding to be told just where Ben’s injuries were, when she detected the fraud.

Then she gasped and stepped back, trying to close the door. She would have succeeded had not Dale thrust a foot into the aperture.

She stamped at his foot with her bare one inef-

fectually. Dale laughed at her futile efforts to keep him from opening the door. He struck an arm through the aperture, leaned his weight against the door, and pushed it open.

She was at the other side of the room when he entered, having dodged behind a table. He made a rush for her, but she evaded him, keeping the table between them.

There was no word said. The girl's breath was coming in great gasps from the fright and shock she had received, but Dale's was shrill and laboring from the strength of his passions.

Reason left him as they circled around the table, and with a curse he overturned it so that it rolled and crashed out of the way, leaving her with no obstacle behind which to find shelter.

She ran toward the door, but Dale caught her at the threshold. She twisted and squirmed in his grasp, scratching him and clawing at his face in an access of terror, and one hand finally caught the black mask covering and tore it from his face.

"Alva Dale!" she shrieked. "Oh, you beast!"

Fighting with redoubled fury she forced him against one of the door jambs, still scratching and clawing. Dale grasped one hand, but the free one reached his face, the fingers sinking into the flesh and making a deep gash in his cheek.

The pain made a demon of Dale, and he struck her. She fell, soundlessly, her head striking the edge of a chair with a deadening, thudding crash.

Standing in the doorway looking down at her, the faint, outdoor light shining on her face and revealing its ghastly whiteness, Dale suffered a quick reaction. He had not meant to strike so hard, he told himself; he hoped he had not killed her.

Kneeling beside her he felt her pulse and her head. The flesh under his hand was cold as marble; the pulse—if there was any—was not perceptible. Dale examined the back of her head, where it had struck the chair. He got up, his face ashen and convulsed with horror.

“Good Lord!” he muttered hoarsely, “she’s dead—or dying. I’ve done it now!”

CHAPTER XXIII

THE GUNMAN

DALE'S first decision was to leave Peggy in the cabin. But she might recover, and she had recognized him. Ben Nyland would exact stern vengeance for the outrage.

Dale stood for some seconds in the doorway, his brain working rapidly. Then he leaped inside the cabin, took the girl up in his arms, carried her to his horse, mounted, and with the limp, sagging body in his arms rode into the night.

Reaction, also, was working on Banker Maison. Though more than an hour had passed since he had got into bed, following the departure of his nocturnal visitor, he had not slept a wink. His brain revolving the incidents of the night—it had been a positive panorama of vivid horrors.

The first gray streak of dawn was splitting the horizon when he gave it up, clambered out of bed, and poured a generous drink from the bottle on the sideboard.

“God, a man needs something like this to brace him up after such a night!” he declared.

He took a second drink from the bottle, and a third. In the act of pouring a fourth he heard a sound at the back door, and with a gulp of terror he remembered that he had again forgotten to lock it.

Sanderson undoubtedly was returning!

Again Maison's body became clammy with a cold sweat. He stood in the room near the sideboard, tremblingly listening. For again there was a step on the stairs.

When he saw the door begin to open his knees knocked together, but there entered, not the dread apparition he expected, but Alva Dale, with the limp form of a woman in his arms!

The sudden breaking of the tension, and astonishment over what he saw, made Maison's voice hoarse.

"What's up now?" he demanded.

"Hell!" muttered Dale. He told Maison the whole story—with some reservations.

"I was sparkin' her—like I've been doin' for a long time. We had a tiff over—over somethin'—an' I pushed her. She fell over, hittin' her head."

"You damned fool!" snapped Maison. Dale was not Sanderson, and Maison felt the authority of his position. "This is Peggy Nyland, isn't it? She's the girl Silverthorn was telling me about—that you're sweet on. You damned fool. Can't you let

the women alone when we're in a deal like this? You'll ruin the whole thing! Get her out of here!"

Dale eyed the other sullenly, his face bloating with rage.

"Look here, Maison; you quit your infernal yap-pin'. She stays here. I thought at first I'd killed her an' I was goin' to plant her. But she's been groanin' a little while I've been comin' here, an' there's a chance for her. Go get the doctor."

"What about her brother?" demanded Maison. "He's a shark with a gun, they tell me, an' a tiger when he's aroused. If he finds out about this he'll kill both of us."

Dale grinned saturninely. "I'll take care of the brother," he said. "You get the doc—an' be damned quick about it!"

Maison went out, and in five minutes returned with the doctor. The latter worked for more than an hour with Peggy, and at last succeeded in reviving her.

But though Peggy opened her eyes, there was no light of reason in them—only the vacuous, unseeing stare of a dulled and apathetic brain.

"She's got an awful whack," said the doctor. "It's cracked her skull. It'll be weeks before she gets over it—if she ever does. I'll come and see her tomorrow."

The doctor came the next day—in the morning. He found the patient no better. A woman, hired by Dale, was caring for the girl.

Also, in the morning, Dale paid a visit. His visit was to Dal Colton, the man Dale had employed to kill Sanderson, and who had so signally failed.

The scene of the meeting between Dale and Colton was in the rear room of the City Hotel.

“Look here,” said Dale. “This deal can’t be no whizzer like you run in on Sanderson. He’s got to be dropped, or things are goin’ to happen to all of us. His name’s Nyland—Ben Nyland. You know him?”

Colton nodded. “Plenty. He’s a fast man with a gun. I’ll have to get him when he ain’t lookin’. You’ll get me clear?”

“No one will know about it,” declared Dale. “You go out to his ranch an’ lay for him. He’ll be in on the afternoon train. When he comes into the door of his house, nail him. That’s easy.”

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCERNING A WOMAN

DAY was breaking when Sanderson rode in to the Double A corral and dismounted. Several of the men of the outfit were astir, and he called to one of them, and told the man to care for his horse. He grinned around at them all, and then went into the house.

Mary Bransford was not yet up. The door that Sanderson had gone out of the night before was still unlocked. He opened it and entered, passing through the sitting-room and halting in the kitchen. He had noted that the door to Mary's room was closed.

Sanderson's dominant emotion was that of grim satisfaction. He had compelled Maison to disgorge the money without jeopardizing his own liberty. Judge Graney's word would suffice to prove his case should Maison proceed against him.

But Sanderson had little fear that Maison would attempt reprisal. If he had judged the man correctly, Maison would not talk, even to Silverthorn.

Sanderson cared very little if he did talk. He had reached the point where the killing of his enemies

would come easy to him. They had chosen lawlessness, and he could wage that kind of warfare as well as they. He had shown them that he could.

He disclosed the visible proof of his ability. One by one he drew the packages of currency from various pockets, tossing them at random on the kitchen table. He was standing at the table, counting the bills in one of the packages, when he heard a sound behind him. He wheeled, to confront Mary Bransford.

She was dressed, but her face was as yet unwashed and her hair uncombed. She stood in the doorway between the dining-room and the kitchen, looking at Sanderson in sleepy-eyed bewilderment.

"I saw you riding in," she said. "Where on earth have you been at this hour? You came from the direction of Okar."

"Business," he grinned.

"Business! Why, what kind of business could take you to Okar during the night?"

"If you could get the sleep out of your eyes," he suggested, "mebbe you could see. It's the kind of business that all the world is interested in—gettin' the money."

And then she saw the packages of bills. She rubbed her eyes as though in doubt of the accuracy of her vision; they grew wide and bright with astonishment

and wonder, and she gave a little, breathless gasp as she ran forward to the table and looked down at the mound of wealth.

And then, convinced that her senses had not played her a trick, her face whitened, she drew a long breath, and turned to Sanderson, grasping the lapels of his coat and holding them tightly.

“Sanderson,” she said in an awed voice, “what have you done? Where did you get that money?”

He told her, and her eyes dilated. “What a reckless thing to do!” she said. “They might have killed you!”

“Maison was havin’ thoughts the other way round,” he grinned. “He was mighty glad I didn’t make him pay for the men he killed.”

“They’ll be after you — they’ll kill you for that!” she told him.

“Shucks,” he laughed. He showed her the document written and signed by Maison, and attested by Judge Graney:

This is to certify that I have tonight paid to Deal Sanderson the sum of ninety thousand dollars for three thousand head of cattle received to my full satisfaction.

“There ain’t no comeback to that!” exulted Sanderson. “Now we’ll start buildin’ that dam. Mebbe, though,” he added, grinning at her, “if you knew where a mighty hungry man could find a good cook

that would be willin' to rustle some grub, there'd be——"

She laughed. "Right away!" she said, and went outside to perform her ablutions.

Sanderson, while she was outside, counted out ten thousand dollars and put it into a pocket. Then he piled the remainder of the money neatly on the table. When Mary came in, her face glowing, her hair freshly combed, he stood and looked at her with admiration in his eyes, and a great longing in his heart.

"I've dreamed of seein' you that way," he said.

"As your cook?" she demanded, reddening.

"A man's grub would taste a heap better if his wife did the cookin'," he said, his face sober.

"Why—why—" she said; "do you mean——"

"I wouldn't be finicky if—if my wife was doin' my cookin'," he declared, his own face crimson.

"I wouldn't kick if she gave me the same kind of grub every mornin'—if it was she I've wanted."

"Why, Sanderson! Is this——"

"It's a proposal, ma'am. I can't say what I want to say—what I've figured on sayin' to you. I don't seem to be able to find the words I wanted to use. But you'll understand, ma'am."

"That you want a cook more than you want a— a wife? Oh, Sanderson!" she mocked.

She knew that it was bashfulness that had caused him to mention the cooking; that he had introduced the subject merely for the purpose of making an oblique start; but she could not resist the temptation to taunt him.

She looked furtively at him to see how deeply she had hurt him, but was surprised to see him grinning widely.

"Women ain't so wise as they pretend to be," he said. "There's grub, *an'* grub. An' what kind of grub is it that a man in love wants most?"

She caught his meaning, now, and blushed rosy red, drooping her eyes from his.

"That wasn't fair, Sanderson," she said lowly. "Besides, a man can't live on kisses."

"I know a man who can," he smiled, his eyes eager and glowing, now that he saw she was not going to repel him; "that is," he added lowly, "if he could find a cook that would give them to him whenever he wanted them. But it would take a lot of them, an' they'd have to be given with the cook's consent. Do you think you could——"

He paused and looked at her, for her eyes were shining and her lips were pursed in a way that left no doubt of the invitation.

"Why, Mary!" he said, as he caught her in his arms.

For a time the money lay on the table unnoticed and forgotten, and there was an eloquent silence in the kitchen.

A little later, Barney Owen, passing close to the kitchen window—having seen the men caring for Sanderson's horse, and learning from them that Sanderson had come in early after having apparently been out all night—heard Sanderson's voice issuing from the kitchen:

“There's a difference in kisses; them that you gave me when you thought I was your brother wasn't half so thrillin' as——”

Owen stiffened and stood rigid, his face whitening. And then again he heard Sanderson's voice:

“There's a judge in Okar—Judge Graney. An' if you'd consider gettin' married today, ma'am why——”

“Why, Sanderson!” came Mary's voice in mild reproof.

“Well, then,” sounded Sanderson's voice, full of resignation this time; “have it your way; I don't want to hurry you.”

“Hurry me? Oh, no!” laughed the girl in gentle mockery. Whereat they both laughed. The sound of it must have pleased Owen, for he, too, laughed as he left the window and went toward the bunk-house.

An hour later Sanderson emerged from the house, threw saddle and bridle on Streak, and rode out into the basin to a camp where he found Kent Williams and his men. He gave the engineer the package of bills he had taken from the table.

“Here is ten thousand dollars,” he said. “You take your men, ride over to Lazette, get your supplies, an’ hustle them right back here. It ain’t likely there’ll be any more trouble, but we ain’t takin’ any chances. My men ain’t got any more cattle to bother with, an’ they’ll go with you an’ your men to Lazette, an’ come back with the wagons to see that they ain’t interfered with. Start as soon as you can get ready.”

Within an hour the engineer, his men, and the men of the Double A outfit were on the move. Barney Owen did not go. He sat on one of the top rails of the corral fence, alternately watching the men of the outfit as they faded into the vast space toward Lazette, and Mary Bransford and Sanderson, as they stood on the porch, close together, likewise watching the men.

“I’d say—if anyone was to ask me—that there is a brother who seems to have been forgotten,” said Owen with a curious smile.

CHAPTER XXV

A MAN IS AROUSED

THE coming of the dawn and the comforting contact with other human beings, brought Banker Maison relief from the terrifying fear that had gripped him during the night. He became almost courageous after breakfast, and began to think that perhaps he had yielded too readily to Sanderson's demands.

As the hours passed and the memory of the night's horror grew more distant, he began to feel indignant over the treatment accorded him by Sanderson. Later the indignation grew to a deep and consuming rage, and he entertained thoughts of his power and influence and of the comparative unimportance of the grim-faced man who had robbed him.

Robbed him — that was it! Sanderson had robbed him!

The more Maison's thoughts dwelt upon the occurrence the deeper grew his rage. He even condoned Dale's action in bringing the Nyland girl to his rooms. Dale was his friend, and he would protect him!

Perhaps Maison did not reflect that his greed was attempting to justify him; that back of his growing championship of Dale was his eagerness to get possession of the Nyland property; and that behind his rage over Sanderson's visit was the bitter thought that Sanderson had compelled him to pay for the destroyed and stolen steers.

Maison did not consider that phase of the question. Or if he did consider it he did not permit that consideration to influence his actions. For within two hours after breakfast he had sent a messenger for Silverthorn and Dale, and fifteen minutes later he was telling them the story of the night's happenings.

Silverthorn's face grew purple with rage during the recital. At its conclusion he got up, dark purpose glinting in his eyes.

"We've got to put Sanderson out of the way, and do it quickly!" he declared. "And we've got to get that money back. Dale, you're a deputy sheriff. Damn the law! This isn't a matter for court action—that damned Graney wouldn't give us a warrant for Sanderson now, no matter what we told him! We've got to take the law into our own hands. We'll see if this man can come in here, rob a bank, and get away without being punished!"

At the end of a fifteen-minute talk, Dale slipped

out of the rear door of the bank and sought the street. In the City Hotel he whispered to several men, who sauntered out of the building singly, mounted their horses, and rode toward the neck of the basin. In another saloon Dale whispered to several other men, who followed the first ones.

Dale's search continued for some little time, and he kept a continuous stream of riders heading toward the neck of the basin. And then, when he had spoken to as many as he thought he needed, he mounted his own horse and rode away.

Sanderson and Mary Bransford had not yet settled the question regarding the disposal of the money Sanderson had received from Banker Maison. They sat on the edge of the porch, talking about it. From a window of the bunkhouse Barney Owen watched them, a pleased smile on his face.

"It's yours," Sanderson told the girl. "An' we ain't trustin' *that* to any bank. Look what they did with the seven thousand I've got in the Lazette bank. They've tied it up so nobody will be able to touch it until half the lawyers in the county have had a chance to gas about it. An' by that time there won't be a two-bit piece left to argue over. No, siree, you've got to keep that coin where you can put your hands on it when you want it!"

“When *you* want it,” she smiled. “Do you know, Deal,” she added seriously, blushing as she looked at him, “that our romance has been so much different from other romances that I’ve heard about. It has seemed so—er—matter of fact.”

He grinned. “All romances—real romances—are a heap matter of fact. Love is the most matter-of-fact thing in the world. When a guy meets a girl that he takes a shine to—an’ the girl takes a shine to him—there ain’t anything goin’ to keep them from makin’ a go of it.”

He reddened a little.

“That’s what I thought when I saw you. Even when the Drifter was tellin’ me about you, I was sure of you.”

“I think you have shown it in your actions,” she laughed.

“But how about you?” he suggested; “did you have any thoughts on the subject?”

“I—I think that even while I thought you were my brother, I realized that my feeling for you was strange and unusual; though I laid it to the fact that I had never had a brother, and therefore could not be expected to know just how a sister should feel toward one. But it has all been unusual, hasn’t it?”

“If you mean me comin’ here like I did, an’

masqueradin', an' lettin' you kiss me, an' fuss over me—why, mebbe that would be considered unusual. But love ain't unusual; an' a man fightin' for the woman he loves ain't unusual."

While he had been talking a change had come over him. His voice had lost its note of gentle rail-lery, his lips had straightened into hard lines, his eyes were glowing with the light she had seen in them more than once—the cold glitter of hostility.

Startled, she took him by the shoulders and shook him.

"Why, what on earth has come over you, Deal?"

He grinned mirthlessly, got up, took a hitch in his cartridge belt, and drew a full breath.

"The fightin' ain't over yet," he said. "There's a bunch of guys comin' toward the Double A. Dale's gang, most likely—after the money I took from Maison."

She was on her feet now, and looking out into the basin. Two or three miles away, enveloped in huge dust cloud, were a number of riders. They were coming fast, and headed directly for the Double A ranchhouse.

The girl clung to Sanderson's arm in sudden terror until he gently released himself, and taking her by the shoulders forced her through a door and into the sitting-room.

“Hide that money in a safe place—where the devil himself couldn’t find it. Don’t give it up, no matter what happens.”

He walked to a window and looked out. Behind him he could hear Mary running here and there; and at last when the riders were within half a mile of the house, she came and stood behind Sanderson, panting, resting her hands on his shoulders to peer over them at the coming riders.

Sanderson turned and smiled at her. “We’ll go out on the porch, now, an’ wait for them.”

“Deal,” she whispered excitedly; “why don’t you go away? Get on Streak—he’ll outrun any horse in the county! Go! Get Williams and the other boys. Deal!” She shook him frenziedly. “It isn’t the money they are after—it’s you! They’ll kill you, Deal! And there are so many of them! Run—run!”

He grinned, patting her shoulder as he led her out upon the porch and forced her into a chair.

When the men had come near enough for him to distinguish their faces, and he saw that Dale was leading them, he walked to a slender porch column and leaned against it, turning to smile at Mary.

“Maison decided he’d have to talk, looks like,” he said. “Some men just can’t help it.”

Rigid in her chair, the girl watched the riders

swoop toward the ranchhouse; Sanderson, lounging against the porch column, smiled saturninely.

The riders headed directly toward the porch. Sanderson counted them as they came to a halt within thirty feet of the edge of the porch. There were twenty of them.

Dale, his face flushed, his eyes alight with triumph, dismounted and stepped forward, halting at the edge of the porch and sweeping his hat from his head with exaggerated courtesy.

“Delighted to see you, ma’am—*an’* your friend, Deal Sanderson. Mr. Sanderson paid my friend Maison a visit last night, takin’ away with him ninety thousand dollars of the bank’s money. Me an’ my men has come over to get the money—*an’* Mr. Sanderson. The Okar court allows that it needs him. I’ve got a warrant for him.”

Dale’s grin was huge. He felt secure with his men behind him.

But if he expected Sanderson to be impressed he was disappointed. The latter’s face did not change color, nor did he shift his position in the slightest manner. And his cold, amused grin disconcerted Dale. His voice, when he spoke, was gentle and drawling:

“Was you thinkin’ Miss Bransford is interested in warrants, Dale? Oh, don’t! There’s an honest

judge in Okar, an' he ain't helpin' Maison's gang. Get back to Okar an' tell Maison that Sanderson ain't visitin' Okar today."

"You ain't, eh!" Dale's voice snapped with rage. "Well, we ain't carin' a damn whether you do or not! We've got you, right where we want you. I've got a warrant, an' you'll come peaceable or we'll plant you! There ain't only two horses in the corral—showin' that your men has gone. An' there ain't anything between you an' the coyotes!"

"Only you, Dale," said Sanderson. His voice was still gentle, still drawling. But into it had come a note that made Dale's face turn pale and caused the bodies of the men in the group to stiffen.

"Only you, Dale," Sanderson repeated. His right hand was at his hip, resting lightly on the butt of the six-shooter that reposed in its holster.

"I've always wanted to test the idea of whether a crook like you thought more of what he was doin' than he did of his own life. This gun leather of mine is kind of short at the top—if you'll notice. The stock an' the hammer of the gun are where they can be touched without interferin' with the leather. There ain't any trigger spring, because I've been brought up to fan the hammer. There ain't any bottom to the holster, an' it's hung by a little piece of leather so's it'll turn easy in any direction.

"It can easy be turned on you. You get goin'. I'll have a chance to bore one man before your crowd gets me. Likely it will be you. What are you sayin'?"

Dale was saying nothing. His face changed color, he shifted his feet uneasily, and looked back at his men. Some of them were grinning, and it was plain to Dale that not one of them would act unless ordered to do so.

And an order, given by him, would mean suicide, nothing less; for from that country in which Sanderson had gained his reputation had come stories of the man's remarkable ability with the weapon he had described, and Dale had no longing to risk his life so recklessly.

There was a long, tense silence. Not a man in the group of riders moved a finger. All were gazing, with a sort of dread fascination, at the holster at Sanderson's right hip, and at the butt of the gun in it, projecting far, the hammer in plain sight.

The situation could not last. Sanderson did not expect it to last. Seemingly calm and unconcerned, he was in reality passionately alert and watchful.

For he had no hope of escaping from this predicament. He had made a mistake in sending his men away with Williams, and he knew the chances against him were too great. He had known that all along

—even when talking and comforting Mary Bransford.

He knew that Dale had come to kill him; that Graney had not issued any warrant for him; for Graney knew that Maison had acted of his own volition—or at least had given the judge that impression.

But whether the warrant was a true one or not, Sanderson had decided that he would not let himself be taken. He had determined that at the first movement made by any man in the group he would kill Dale and take his chance with the others.

Dale knew it—he saw the cold resolution in Sanderson's eyes. Dale drew a deep breath, and the men in the group behind him watched him narrowly.

But just when it seemed that decisive action in one direction or another must be taken, there came an interruption.

Behind Sanderson—from one of the windows of the ranchhouse—came a hoarse curse.

Sanderson saw Dale's eyes dilate; he saw the faces of the men in the group of riders change color; he saw their hands go slowly upward. Dale, too, raised his hands.

Glancing swiftly over his shoulder, Sanderson saw Barney Owen at one of the windows. He was inside the house; his arms were resting on the win-

dow-sill. He was kneeling, and in his hands was a rifle, the muzzle covering Dale and the men who had come with him.

Owen's face was chalk white and working with demoniac passion. His eyes were wild, and blazing with a wanton malignancy that awed every man who looked at him—Sanderson included. His teeth were bared in a horrible snarl; the man was like some wild animal—worse, the savage, primitive passions of him were unleashed and rampant, directed by a reasoning intelligence. His voice was hoarse and rasping, coming in jerks:

“Get out of the way, Sanderson! Stand aside! I'll take care of these whelps! Get your hands up, Dale! Higher—higher! You damned, sneaking vulture! Come here to make trouble, eh? You and your bunch of curs! I'll take care of you! Move—one of you! Move a finger! You won't! Then go! Go! I'll count three! The man that isn't going when I finish counting gets his quick! One—two——”

“Wait!” Already on the move, the men halted at the sound of his voice. The violence of the passion that gripped him gave him a new thought.

“You don't go!” he jeered at them. “You stay here. Sanderson, you take their guns! Grab them yourself!”

Sanderson drew his own weapon and moved rapidly among the men. He got Dale's gun first and threw it in the sand at the edge of the porch. Then he disarmed the others, one after another, throwing the weapons near where he had thrown Dale's.

He heard Owen tell Mary Bransford to get them, and he saw Mary gathering them up and taking them into the house.

Sanderson made his search of the men thorough, for he had caught the spirit of the thing. At last, when the guns were all collected, Owen issued another order:

“Now turn your backs—every last man of you! And stay that way! The man that turns his head will never do it again!

“Sanderson, you go after Williams and the others. They've only been gone about an hour, and they won't travel fast. Get them! Bring them back here. Then we'll take the whole bunch over to Okar and see what Judge Graney has to say about that warrant!”

Sanderson looked at Mary Bransford, a huge grin on his face. She smiled stiffly at him in return, and nodded her head.

Seemingly, it was the only way out of a bad predicament. Certainly they could not commit wholesale murder, and it was equally certain that if Dale was

permitted to go, he and his men would return. Or they might retire to a distance, surround the house and thus achieve their aim.

Sanderson, however, was not satisfied, for he knew that a sudden, concerted rush by the men—even though they were unarmed—would result disastrously to Owen—and to Mary—if she decided to remain.

Telling the little man to keep a watchful eye on the men, he went among them, ordering those that were mounted from their horses. When they were all standing, he began to uncoil the ropes that were hanging from the saddles.

He worked fast, and looking up once he saw Owen's eyes glowing with approval—while Mary smiled broadly at him. They knew what he meant to do.

Dale and his men knew also, for their faces grew sullen. Sanderson, however, would tolerate no resistance. Rope in hand, he faced Dale. The latter's face grew white with impotent fury as he looked at the rope in Sanderson's hands; but the significant hardness that flashed into Sanderson's eyes convinced him of the futility of resistance, and he held his hands outward.

Sanderson tied them. Very little of the rope was required in the process, and after Dale was secured,

Sanderson threw a loop around the hands of a man who stood beside Dale, linking him with the latter.

Several others followed. Sanderson used half a dozen ropes, and when he had finished, all the Dale men—with their leader on an extreme end, were lashed together.

There were hard words spoken by the men; but they brought only grins to Sanderson's face, to Owen's, and to Mary's.

"They won't bother you a heap, now," declared Sanderson as he stepped toward the porch and spoke to Owen. "Keep an eye on them, though, an' don't let them go to movin' around much."

Sanderson stepped up on the porch and spoke lowly to Mary, asking her to go with him after Williams—for he had had that thought in mind ever since Owen had issued the order for him to ride after the engineer.

But Mary refused, telling Sanderson that by accompanying him she would only hamper him.

Reluctantly, then, though swiftly, Sanderson ran to the corral, threw saddle and bridle on Streak, and returned to the porch. He halted there for a word with Owen and Mary, then raced northeastward, following a faint trail that Williams and the others had taken, which led for a time over the plains, then upward to the mesa which rimmed the basin.

CHAPTER XXVI

A MAN IS HANGED

SANDERSON and Streak grew dim in the distance until, to the watchers at the ranchhouse, horse and rider merged into a mere blot that crawled up the long slope leading to the mesa. The watchers saw the blot yet a little longer, as it traveled with swift, regular leaps along the edge of the mesa; then it grew fainter and fainter, and at last they saw it no more.

Dale's men, their backs to Owen and Mary, seemed to have accepted their defeat in a spirit of resignation, for they made no attempt to turn their heads.

Mary, white and shaking, though with a calmness that came from the knowledge that in this crisis she must do what she could, went inside and stood behind Owen, ready to respond to any call he might make upon her.

Owen, his rage somewhat abated, though he still watched Dale and his men with sullen, malevolent eyes, had changed his position. Mary had brought a chair, and Owen sat on it, the rifle still resting on the window-sill, menacing the men.

The minutes, it seemed to the girl, passed with exceeding slowness. She watched the hands of a clock on a shelf in the room drag themselves across the face of the dial, and twice she walked in front of the shelf and peered intently at the clock, to be certain it was going.

Williams and the other men had been gone for something more than an hour. But, as Owen had said, they would travel slowly, having no incentive for haste. Sanderson, on the other hand, would make Streak run his best—and she knew Streak could run.

So she began to estimate the time that would elapse before Sanderson and Williams returned. With an hour's start, she gave Sanderson three-quarters of an hour to catch them. Then, three quarters of an hour additional would be required for the run home—if they came back as swiftly as Sanderson had gone.

But she doubted that. She would give them a full hour for the return trip. That would make an hour and three quarters.

But it seemed to her that an age elapsed before the minute hand on the clock dragged itself one-quarter of the distance around the circle.

She looked out at Dale and his men. The men were all standing, their backs to the house. But it

seemed to the girl that they were standing nearer to one another than they had been all along, and a pulse of trepidation ran over her.

Watching them closely, Mary felt they were meditating some action. They were whispering to one another, and Dale was gesturing as emphatically as he could.

The girl was certain they contemplated concerted action of some sort, and she was just about to apprise Owen of her fears, when she saw one of the men—and then another and another—working with the ropes that bound them. One of the men turned, a huge grin on his face. She caught the flash of metal in the man's hands, saw the rope fall from them, severed.

She shouted, then, at Owen:

“Look out, Barney; they've got a knife!”

At the instant she spoke the men moved as though by prearrangement. By the time her voice reached Owen's ears the men had scattered, running in all directions. Several ran directly away from the house, others toward it, some went toward the corners of the building nearest them. All were running in zigzag fashion.

Owen, his eyes blazing, fired three times in rapid succession. One of the men tumbled headlong, turning over several times and landing face downward

on the sand of the yard; but several others, apparently uninjured, ran straight for the ranchhouse.

There were no stationary targets for Owen to shoot at. By the time he had fired the three shots the men were all moving. Several the girl saw as they ran around the ranchhouse; three or four others ran straight for the door in which she stood.

She cried sharply to Owen, and the latter fired once, as three or four figures crossed the porch. The girl could not tell whether or not Dale was one of the three, for the men moved quickly.

Owen missed; Mary heard him curse. And before he had time to do either again the men were inside. Mary was standing near Owen, and she had reached down for one of the pistols that lay on the floor.

By the time the men entered the door she had raised the weapon, and as the first figure burst through the opening, she leveled the weapon and pulled the trigger.

The gun went off, but did no apparent damage, and before she could fire again the men were upon her. She threw the heavy weapon into the face of the man nearest her—she did not look at him; and ran through the nearest door, which opened into the kitchen. She heard the man curse as the weapon struck him full in the face, and she knew, then, that she had struck Dale.

In the kitchen the girl hesitated. She would have gone outside, on the chance that the men there might not see her, but, hesitating at the kitchen door, she saw a big man running toward it.

So she turned and ran into the room she used as a pantry, slamming the door behind her, bolting it and leaning against it, breathing heavily.

She had not, however, escaped the eyes of the man who had been running toward the kitchen door. She heard Dale's voice, asking one of the men if he had seen her, and the latter answered:

"She ducked into the pantry and closed the door."

She heard a man step heavily across the kitchen floor, and an instant later he was shoving against the door with a shoulder.

"Bolted, eh?" he said with a short laugh. He walked away, and presently returned. "Well, you'll keep," he said, "there ain't any windows."

She knew from his voice that the man was Dale. He had gone outside and had seen there was no escape for her except through the door she had barred.

There came a silence except for the movements of the men, and the low hum of their voices. She wondered what had become of Owen, but she did not dare unbolt the door for fear that Dale might be waiting on the other side of it. So, in the grip

of a nameless terror she leaned against the door and waited.

She heard Dale talking to his men; he was standing near the door behind which she stood, and she could hear him distinctly.

“You guys hit the breeze after Sanderson. Kill him—an’ anybody that’s with him! Wipe out the whole bunch! I’ll stay here an’ make the girl tell me where the coin is. Get goin’, an’ go fast, for Sanderson will travel some!”

The girl heard the boots of the men clatter on the floor as they went out. Listening intently, she could hear the thudding of their horses’ hoofs as they fled. She shrank back from the door, looking hard at it, wondering if it would hold, if it would resist Dale’s efforts to burst it open—as she knew he would try to do.

She wished, now, that she had followed Sanderson’s suggestion about riding after Williams. This situation would not have been possible, then.

Working feverishly, she piled against the door all the available articles and objects she could find. There were not many of them, and they looked a pitifully frail barricade to her.

A silence that followed was endured with her cringing against the barricade. She had a hope that Dale would search for the money—that he would

find it, and go away without attempting to molest her. But when she heard his step just outside the door, she gave up hope and stood, her knees shaking, awaiting his first movement.

It came quickly enough. She heard him; saw the door give just a trifle as he leaned his weight against it.

The movement made her gasp, and he heard the sound.

“So you’re still there, eh? Well, I thought you would be. Open the door!”

“Dale,” she said, desperately, “get out of here! I’ll tell you where the money is—I don’t want it.”

“All right,” he said; “where is it?”

“It’s in the parlor; the packages are stuffed between the springs of the lounge.”

He laughed, jeeringly.

“That dodge don’t go,” he said in a voice that made her feel clammy all over. “If it’s there, all right. I’ll get it. But the money can wait. Open the door!”

“Dale,” she said, as steadily as she could, “if you try to get in here I shall kill you!”

“That’s good,” he laughed; “you threw your gun at me. It hit me, too. Besides if you had a gun you’d be lettin’ it off now—this door ain’t so thick that a bullet wouldn’t go through it. Shoot!”

Again there came a silence. She heard Dale walking about in the kitchen. She heard him place a chair near the wall which divided the pantry from the kitchen, and then for the first time she realized that the partition did not reach entirely to the ceiling; that it rose to a height only a few feet above her head.

She heard Dale laugh, triumphantly, at just the instant she looked at the top of the partition, and she saw one of Dale's legs come over. It dangled there for a second; then the man's head and shoulders appeared, with his hands gripping the top of the wall.

She began to tear at the barricade she had erected, and had only succeeded in partially demolishing it, when Dale swung his body over the wall and dropped lightly beside her.

She fought him with the only weapons she had, her hands, not waiting for him to advance on her, but leaping at him in a fury and striking his face with her fists, as she had seen men strike others.

He laughed, deeply, scornfully, as her blows landed, mocking her impotent resistance. Twice he seized her hands and swept them brutally to her sides, where he held them—trying to grip them in one of his; but she squirmed free and fought him again, clawing at his eyes.

The nails of her fingers found his cheek, gashing it deeply. The pain from the hurt made him furious.

"Damn you, you devil, I'll fix you!" he cursed. And in an access of bestial rage he tore her hands from his face, crushed them to her sides, wrenching them cruelly, until she cried out in agony.

Then, his face hideous, he seized her by the shoulders and crushed her against the outside wall, so that her head struck it and she sagged forward into his arms, unconscious.

The lock on Barney Owen's rifle had jammed just as Dale entered the room, following the rush of the men to the outside door. He had selected Dale as his target.

He tried for a fatal instant to work the lock, saw his error, and swung the weapon over his head in an attempt to brain the man nearest him. The man dodged and the rifle slipped from Owen's hands and went clattering to the floor. Then the man struck with the butt of one of the pistols he had picked up from the floor, and Owen went down in a heap.

When he regained consciousness the room was empty. For a time he lay where he had fallen, too dizzy and faint to get to his feet; and then he heard Dale's voice, saying:

"A bullet wouldn't go through it. Shoot!"

At the sound of Dale's voice a terrible rage, such as had seized Owen at the moment he had stuck the rifle through the window, gripped him now, and he sat up, swaying from the strength of it. He got to his feet, muttering insanely, and staggered toward the kitchen door — from the direction in which Dale's voice seemed to come.

It took him some time to reach the door, and when he did get there he was forced to lean against one of the jambs for support.

But he gained strength rapidly, and peering around the door jamb he was just in time to see Dale step on a chair and lift himself over the partition dividing the kitchen from the pantry.

Owen heard the commotion that followed Dale's disappearance over the partition; he heard the succeeding crashes and the scuffling. Then came Dale's voice:

“Damn you, you devil, I'll fix you!”

Making queer sounds in his throat, Owen ran into the sitting-room where the weapons taken from the men had been piled. They were not there. He picked up the rifle. By some peculiar irony the lock worked all right for him now, but a quick look told him there were no more cartridges in the magazine. He dropped the rifle and looked wildly around for another weapon.

He saw a lariat hanging from a peg on the kitchen wall. It was Sanderson's rope—Owen knew it. Sanderson had oiled it, and had hung it from the peg to dry.

Owen whined with joy when he saw it. His face working, odd guttural sounds coming from his throat, Owen leaped for the rope and pulled it from the peg. Swiftly uncoiling it, he glanced at the loop to make sure it would run well; then with a bound he was on the chair and peering over the top of the partition, the rope in hand, the noose dangling.

He saw Dale directly beneath it. The Bar D man was standing over Mary Bransford. The girl was on her back, her white face upturned, her eyes closed.

Grinning with hideous joy, Owen threw the rope. The loop opened, widened, and dropped cleanly over Dale's head.

Dale threw up both hands, trying to grasp the sinuous thing that had encircled his neck, but the little man jerked the rope viciously and the noose tightened. The force of the jerk pulled Dale off his balance, and he reeled against the partition.

Before he could regain his equilibrium Owen leaned far over the top of the partition. Exerting the last ounce of his strength Owen lifted, and Dale swung upward, swaying like an eccentric pendulum, his feet well off the floor.

Dale's back was toward the wall, and he twisted and squirmed like a cat to swing himself around so that he could face it.

During the time Dale struggled to turn, Owen moved rapidly. Leaping off the chair, keeping the rope taut over the top of the partition, Owen ran across the kitchen and swiftly looped the end of the rope around a wooden bar that was used to fasten the rear outside door.

Then, running into the front room, he got the rifle, and returning to the kitchen he got on the chair beside the partition.

He could hear Dale cursing. The man's legs were thrashing about, striking the boards of the partition. Owen could hear his breath as it coughed in his throat. But the little man merely grinned, and crouched on the chair, waiting.

He was waiting for what he knew would come next. Dale would succeed in twisting his body around before the rope could strangle him; he would grasp the rope and pull himself upward until he could reach the top of the partition with his hands.

And while Owen watched and waited, Dale's hands came up and gripped the top of the wall—both hands, huge and muscular. Owen looked at them with great glee before he acted. Then he brought the stock of the rifle down on one of the hands with

the precision of a cold deliberation that had taken possession of him.

Dale screamed with the pain of the hurt, then cursed. But he still gripped the top of the partition with the other hand.

Owen grinned, and with the deliberation that had marked the previous blow he again brought the rifle stock down, smashing the remaining hand. That, too, disappeared, and Dale's screaming curses filled the cabin.

Owen waited. Twice more the hands came up, and twice more Owen crushed them with the rifle butt. At last, though Owen waited for some time, the hands came up no more. Then, slowly, cautiously, Owen stuck his head over the top of the partition.

Dale's head had fallen forward; he was swinging slowly back and forth, his body limp and lax.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE AMBUSH

STREAK had done well, having slightly improved on the limit set for the trip by Mary Bransford. With no delay whatever, Williams and his men and the Double A cowpunchers were headed for the ranchhouse, their horses running hard.

Sanderson was leading them, though close behind came several of the Double A men, their faces set and grim; and then one of Williams' men, a young fellow who had admired Mary Bransford from afar; then some more of the Double A men, and Williams and the remainder of his band of engineers.

There was no word spoken. In a few swift sentences Sanderson had told them what had occurred, and there was no need for words as they fled southwestward.

For a few miles the trail was hard and smooth, and the posse made good time. Then they struck a stretch of broken country, where volcanic action had split the surface of the earth into fissures and chasms, thus making speed impossible.

It took them long to cross the section, and when

it was behind them they found themselves in a hilly country where the going was not much better than it had been in the volcanic area.

The trail was narrow, and they were forced to travel in single file. Sanderson led the way, Streak thundering along, a living blot splitting the brown, barren wasteland, followed closely by other blots, rushing over the hazardous trail, the echoes of their passing creating a rumble as of drumfire reverberating in a cañon.

They came to a point where the trail led upward sharply, veering around the shoulder of a hill and dropping precipitously into a valley.

For an instant, as the riders flashed around the shoulder of the hill, they caught a glimpse of a group of riders coming toward them, visible to Sanderson and the others as they were for a second exposed to view in a narrow defile. Then the view of them was cut off, and Sanderson and the men following him were in the valley, riding desperately, as before.

Still there had been no word said. Sanderson had seen the oncoming riders, but he attached no importance to their appearance, for cowpunchers often rode in groups to some outlying camp, and these men might belong to some ranch in the vicinity.

There was a straight stretch of hard, smooth trail in the center of the valley, and Sanderson made

Streak take it with a rush. Sanderson grinned grimly as he heard the other men coming close behind him—they were as eager as he, and as vengeful.

Up out of the valley went Streak, running with long, smooth leaps that gave no indication of exhaustion; Sanderson patted his neck as he raced upward out of the valley and into the defile where they had seen the riders.

Sanderson was halfway up the defile when he was assailed with the thought that by this time—even before this—they should have met the other riders—had the latter kept the trail.

Struck by a sudden suspicion that there was something strange about the disappearance of the riders, Sanderson abruptly pulled Streak up. The other men were some distance behind, and Sanderson slipped out of the saddle to give Streak a breathing spell.

The movement saved his life, for his feet had hardly struck the ground when he heard the thud of a rifle bullet, the sharp crash of the weapon, and saw the leaden missile rip the leather on the cantle of the saddle.

As though the shot were a signal, there followed others—a ripping, crashing volley. Sanderson saw the smoke spurts ballooning upward from behind

some rocks and boulders that dotted the hills on both sides of the defile; he saw several of his men drop from their horses and fall prone to the ground.

He shouted to the men to leave their horses and "take cover;" and he himself sought the only cover near him—a wide fissure in the wall of the long slope below the point where the attackers were concealed.

Streak, apparently aware of the danger, followed Sanderson into the shelter of the fissure.

It was an admirable spot for an ambuscade. Sanderson saw that there were few places in which his men could conceal themselves, for the hostile force occupied both sides of the defile. Their rifles were still popping, and Sanderson saw two of the Double A force go down before they could find shelter.

Sanderson divined what had happened—Dale and his men had overpowered Owen, and had set this ambuscade for himself and the Double A men.

Dale was determined to murder all of them; it was to be a fight to a finish—that grim killing of an entire outfit, which, in the idiomatic phraseology of the cowpuncher, is called a "clean-up."

Sanderson was aware of the disadvantage which must be faced, but there was no indication of fear or excitement in his manner. It was not the first time he had been in danger, and he drew his belt

tighter and examined his pistols as he crouched against the ragged wall of the fissure. Then, calling Streak to him, he pulled his rifle out of the saddle holster and examined the magazine.

Rifle in hand, he first surveyed the wall of the defile opposite him. The crevice in which he was hiding was irregular at the entrance, and a jutting shoulder of it concealed him from view from the wall of the defile opposite him. Another projection, opposite the jutting shoulder, protected him from any shots that might be aimed at him from his left.

The fissure ran, with sharp irregularities, clear up the face of the wall behind him. He grinned with satisfaction when he saw that there were a number of places along the upward line of the fissure which would afford him concealment in an offensive battle with Dale's men.

He contemplated making things rather warm for the Dale contingent presently; but first he must make sure that none of his own men was exposed to danger.

Cautiously, then, he laid his head close to the ragged wall of the fissure and peered upward and outward. Behind a big boulder on the opposite side of the defile he saw a man's head appear.

Watching for a time, Sanderson made certain the man was not one of his own outfit, and then he shoved

the muzzle of his rifle out, laid his cheek against the stock, and covered the partly exposed head of the man behind the boulder.

Sanderson waited long with his cheek caressing the rifle stock, while the man behind the boulder wriggled farther out, exposing himself more and more in his eagerness to gain a more advantageous position.

And presently, without moving his head, Sanderson discovered that it was Williams who was in danger.

Williams had concealed himself behind a jagged rock, which protected him from the bullets fired from across the defile, and from the sides. But the rock afforded him no protection from the rear, and the man behind the boulder was going to take advantage of his opportunity.

"That's my engineer, mister," he said grimly; "an' I ain't lettin' you make me go to the trouble of sendin' east for another. You're ready now, eh?"

The man behind the boulder had reached a position that satisfied him. Sanderson saw him snuggle the stock of his rifle against his shoulder.

Sanderson's rifle cracked viciously. The man behind the boulder was lying on a slight slope, and when Sanderson's bullet struck him, he gently rolled

over and began to slide downward. He came—a grotesque, limp thing—down the side of the defile, past the engineer, sliding gently until he landed in a queer-looking huddle at the bottom, near the trail.

Sanderson intently examined other rocks and boulders on the opposite side of the defile. He had paid no attention to Williams' "Good work, Sanderson!" except to grin and assure himself that Williams hadn't "lost his nerve."

Presently at an angle that ran obliquely upward from a flat, projecting ledge, behind which another Double A man lay, partly concealed, Sanderson detected movement.

It was only a hat that he saw this time, and a glint of sunlight on the barrel of a rifle. But he saw that the rifle, after moving, became quite motionless, and he suspected that it was about to be used.

Again the cheek snuggled the stock of his rifle.

"This is goin' to be some shot—if I make it!" he told himself just before he fired. "There ain't nothin' to shoot at but one of his ears, looks like."

But at the report of the rifle, the weapon that had been so rigid and motionless slipped from behind the rock and clattered downward. It caught halfway between the rock and the bottom of the defile. There came no sound from behind the rock, and no movement.

“Got him!” yelled Williams. “Go to it! There’s only two more on this side, that I can see. They’re trying mighty hard to perforate me—I’m losing weight dodging around here trying to keep them from drawing a bead on me. If I had a rifle——”

Williams’ voice broke off with the crash of a rifle behind him, though a little to one side. Talking to Sanderson, and trying to see him, Williams had stuck his head out a little too far. The bullet from the rifle of the watching enemy, clipped off a small piece of the engineer’s ear.

Williams’ voice rose in impotent rage, filling the defile with profane echoes. Sanderson did not hear Williams. He had chanced to be looking toward the spot from whence the smoke spurt came.

A fallen tree, its top branches hanging down the wall of the defile, provided concealment from which the enemy had sent his shot at Williams. Sanderson snapped a shot at the point where he had seen the smoke streak, and heard a cry of rage.

A man, his face distorted with pain, stood up behind the fallen tree trunk, the upper part of his body in plain view.

His rage had made him reckless, and he had stood erect the better to aim his rifle at the fissure in which Sanderson was concealed. He fired—and missed, for Sanderson had ducked at the movement. San-

derson heard the bullet strike the rock wall above his head, and go ricochetting into the cleft behind him.

He peered out again instantly, to see that the man was lying doubled across the fallen tree trunk, his rifle having dropped, muzzle down, in some bushes below him.

Sanderson heard Williams' voice, raised in savage exultation:

"Nip my ear, will you—you measly son-of-a-gun! I'll show you!

"Got him with my pistol!" he yelled to one of the Double A men near him. "Come on out and fight like men, you miserable whelps!"

The young engineer's fighting blood was up—that was plain to Sanderson. Sanderson grinned, yielded to a solemn hope that Williams would not get reckless and expose himself needlessly, and began to examine the walls of the fissure to determine on a new offensive movement.

He was interrupted, though, by another shout from Williams.

"Got him!" yelled the engineer; "plumb in the beezer!"

Sanderson peered out, to see the body of a man come tumbling down the opposite wall of the defile.

"That's all on this side!" Williams informed the

others, shouting. "Now let's get at the guys on the other side and salivate them!"

Again Sanderson grinned at the engineer's enthusiasm. That enthusiasm was infectious, for Sanderson heard some of the other men laughing. The laughing indicated that they now entertained a hope of ultimate victory—a hope which they could not have had before Williams and Sanderson had disposed of the enemies at their rear.

Sanderson, too, was imbued with a spirit of enthusiasm. He began to climb the walls of the crevice, finding the ragged rock projections admirably convenient for footing.

However, his progress was slow, for he had to be careful not to let his head show above the edge of the rock that formed the fissure; and so he was busily engaged for the greater part of half an hour before he finally reached a position from which he thought he could get a glimpse of the men on his side of the defile.

Meanwhile there had been no sound from the bottom, or the other side of the defile, except an occasional report of a rifle, which told that Dale's men were firing, or the somewhat more crashing report of a pistol, which indicated that his own men were replying.

From where he crouched in the fissure, Sanderson

could see some of the horses at the bottom of the defile. They were grazing unconcernedly. Scattered along the bottom of the defile were the men who had fallen at the first fire, and Sanderson's eye glinted with rage when he looked at them; for he recognized some of them as men of the outfit for whom he had conceived a liking. Two of Williams' men were lying there, too, and Sanderson's lips grimmed as he looked at them.

Thoroughly aroused now, Sanderson replaced the empty cartridges in the rifle with loaded ones, and, finding a spot between two small boulders, he shoved the muzzle of the rifle through.

He had no fear of being shot at from the rear, for the men had permitted him to go far enough through the defile to allow the others following him to come into range before they opened fire.

Thus Sanderson was between the Dale outfit and the Double A ranchhouse, and he had only to look back in the direction from which he and Williams had come. None of the Dale men could cross the fissure.

Cautiously Sanderson raised his head above the rocky edge of the fissure. He kept his head concealed behind the two small boulders and he had an uninterrupted view of the entire side of the defile.

He saw a number of men crouching behind rocks

and boulders that were scattered over the steep slope, and he counted them deliberately—sixteen. He could see their faces plainly, and he recognized many of them as Dale's men. They were of the vicious type that are to be found in all lawless communities.

Sanderson's grin as he sighted along the barrel of his rifle was full of sardonic satisfaction, tempered with a slight disappointment. For he did not see Dale among the others. Dale, he supposed, had stayed behind.

The thought of what Dale might be doing at the Double A ranchhouse maddened Sanderson, and taking quick sight at a man crouching behind a rock, he pulled the trigger.

Looking only in front of him, at the other side of the defile where Sanderson's men were concealed, the man did not expect attack from a new quarter, and as Sanderson's bullet struck him he leaped up, howling with pain and astonishment, clutching at his breast.

He had hardly exposed himself when several reports from the other side of the defile greeted him. The man staggered and fell behind his rock, his feet projecting from one side and his head from the other.

Instantly the battle took on a new aspect. It was

a flank attack, which Dale's men had not anticipated, and it confused them. Several of them shifted their positions, and in doing so they brought parts of their bodies into view of the men on the opposite wall.

There rose from the opposite wall a succession of reports, followed by hoarse cries of pain from Dale's men. They flopped back again, thus exposing themselves to Sanderson's fire, and the latter lost not one of his opportunities.

It was the aggressors themselves that were now under cross fire, and they relished it very little.

A big man, incensed at his inability to silence Sanderson, and wounded in the shoulder, suddenly left the shelter of his rock and charged across the steep face of the slope toward the fissure.

This man was brave, despite his associations, but he was a Dale man, and deserved no mercy. Sanderson granted him none. Halfway of the distance between his rock and the fissure he charged before Sanderson shot him. The man fell soundlessly, turning over and over in his descent to the bottom of the defile.

And then rose Williams' voice—Sanderson grinned with bitter humor:

“We've got them, boys; we've got them. Give them hell, the damned buzzards!”

CHAPTER XXVIII

NYLAND MEETS A "KILLER"

BEN NYLAND had gone to Lazette to attend to some business that had demanded his attention. He had delayed going until he could delay no longer.

"I hate like blazes to go away an' leave you alone here—to face that beast, Dale, if he comes sneakin' around. But I reckon I've just got to go—I can't put it off any longer. If you'd only go an' stay at Bransford's while I'm gone I'd feel a heap easier in my mind."

"I'm not a bit afraid," Peggy declared. "That last experience of Dale's with Sanderson has done him good, and he won't bother me again."

That had been the conversation between Ben and Peggy as Ben got ready to leave. And he had gone away, half convinced that Peggy was right, and that Dale would not molest her.

But he had made himself as inconspicuous as possible while in Okar, waiting for the train, and he was certain that none of Dale's men had seen him.

Nyland had concluded his business as quickly as possible, but the best he could do was to take the

return train that he had told Peggy he would take. That train brought him back to Okar late in the afternoon of the next day.

Ben Nyland had been born and raised in the West, and he was of the type that had made the West the great supply store of the country. Rugged, honest, industrious, Ben Nyland had no ambitions beyond those of taking care of his sister—which responsibility had been his since the death of his parents years before.

It had not been a responsibility, really, for Nyland worshiped his sister, and it had been his eagerness to champion her that had made an enemy of Alva Dale.

He hated Dale, but not more than he hated Maison and Silverthorn for the part they were playing—and had played—in trying to rob him of his land.

Nyland was a plodder, but there ran in his veins the fighting blood of ancestors who had conquered the hardships and dangers of a great, rugged country, and there had been times when he thought of Dale and the others that his blood had leaped like fire through his veins.

Twice Peggy had prevented him from killing Alva Dale.

Nyland was afflicted with a premonition of evil when he got off the train at Okar. To the insistence

of the owner of the livery stable, where he had left his horse, Nyland replied:

"I ain't got no time to do any drinkin'; I've got to get home."

The premonition of evil still oppressed him as he rode his horse homeward. He rode fast, his face set and worried.

When he reached the clearing through which Dale had come on the night he had visited the Nyland cabin, he looked furtively around, for the dire foreboding that had gripped him for hours had grown suddenly stronger.

He halted his horse and sat motionless in the saddle, intently examining every object within view.

It was to the horse corral that he finally turned when he could see nothing strange in the objects around him. He had looked at the house, and there seemed to be nothing wrong here, for he could see Peggy's wash on the line that ran from a porch column to a corner of the stable.

The actions of the three horses in the corral was what attracted his attention. They were crowding the rail at the point nearest him, neighing shrilly, though with a curious clacking in their throats that he instantly detected.

"They're wantin' water," he said aloud. He rode to the water trough and saw that it was dry, with a

deposit in the bottom which did not contain a drop of moisture.

“There ain’t been no water put in there since I left,” he decided; “them horses is chokin’ with thirst.”

A pulse of anxiety ran over him. There was no doubt in his mind now that his presentiment of evil was not without foundation, and he wheeled his horse and sent it toward the house.

“Peggy would give them water if she was able to be on her feet,” he declared, “she’s that kind.”

But halfway to the house another thought assailed him. It drew his brows together in a scowl; it stiffened his lips until they were in straight, hard lines.

“Mebbe Dale’s been here! Mebbe he’s still here!”

He abruptly halted his horse and gazed around him. As though he expected to find something there he looked toward a little timber grove to the right of the house, far back toward the rimming hills. At the edge of the grove he saw a horse, saddled and bridled.

A quick change came over Nyland. The blood left his face, and his eyes took on an expression of cold cunning.

Dismounting, he hitched his horse to one of the rails of the corral fence. With his back turned to the house, his head cocked to one side, as though

he were intent on the knot he was tying in the reins, he furtively watched the house.

He took a long time to tie the reins to the rail, but the time was well spent, for, before he finished, he saw a man's face at one of the kitchen windows.

It was not Dale. He was convinced of that, even though he got only a flashing glance at the face.

Danger threatened Peggy, or she had succumbed to it. There was no other explanation of the presence of a strange man in the kitchen. For if Peggy was able to walk, she would have watered the horses; she would have met him at the door, as she had always done.

And if the man were there for any good purpose he would have made his presence known to Nyland, and would not have hidden himself in the kitchen, to peer at Nyland through one of the windows.

Nyland was convinced that Peggy had been foully dealt with. But haste and recklessness would avail Nyland little. The great mingled rage and anxiety that had seized him demanded instant action, but he fought it down; and when he turned toward the house and began to walk toward the kitchen door, his manner—outwardly—was that of a man who has seen nothing to arouse his suspicions.

Yet despite the appearance of calm he was alert, and every muscle and sinew of his body was tensed

for instant action. And so, when he had approached to within a dozen feet of the kitchen door, and a man's figure darkened the opening, he dove sidewise, drawing his gun as he went down and snapping a shot at the figure he had seen.

So rapid were his movements, and so well timed was his fall, that he was halfway to the ground when the flash came from the doorway. And the crash of his own gun followed the other so closely that the two seemed almost instantaneous.

Nyland did not conclude his acrobatic performance with the dive. Landing on the ground he rolled over and over, scrambling toward the wall of the cabin—reaching it on all fours and crouching there, gun in hand—waiting.

He had heard no sound from the man, nor did the latter appear. The silence within the cabin was as deep as it had been just an instant before the exchange of shots.

There was a window in the rear wall of the cabin—a kitchen window. There was another on the opposite side—the dining-room. There was a front door and two windows on the side Nyland was on.

Two courses were open for Nyland. He could gain entrance to the house through one of the windows or the front door, thereby running the risk of making a target of himself, or he could stay on the out-

side and wait for the man to come out—which he would have to do some time.

Nyland decided to remain where he was. For a long time he crouched against the wall and nothing happened. Then, growing impatient, he moved stealthily around the rear corner, stole to the rear window, and peered inside.

It took him long to prepare for the look—he accomplished the action in an instant—a flashing glance. A gun roared close to his head, the flash blinding him; the glass tinkling on the ground at his feet.

But Nyland had not been hit, and he grinned felinely as he dropped to the ground, slipped under the window, and ran around the house. Ducking under the side window he ran around to the front. From the front window he could look through the house, and he saw the man, gun in hand, watching the side door.

Nyland took aim through the window, but just as he was about to pull the trigger of the weapon the man moved stealthily toward the door—out of Nyland's vision.

Evidently the man considered the many windows to be a menace to his safety, and had determined to go outside, where he would have an equal chance with his intended victim.

Grinning coldly, Nyland moved to the corner of the house nearest the kitchen door. The man stepped out of the door, and at the instant Nyland saw him he was looking toward the rear of the house.

Nyland laughed—aloud, derisively. He did not want to shoot the man in the back.

At Nyland's laugh the man wheeled, snapping a shot from his hip. He was an instant too late, though, for with the man's wheeling movement Nyland's gun barked death to him.

He staggered, the gun falling from his loosening fingers, his hands dropped to his sides, and he sagged forward inertly, plunging into the dust in front of the kitchen door.

Nyland ran forward, peered into the man's face, saw that no more shooting on his part would be required, and then ran into the house to search for Peggy.

She was not in the house—a glance into each room told Nyland that. He went outside again, his face grim, and knelt beside the man.

The latter's wound was fatal—Nyland saw that plainly, for the bullet had entered his breast just above the heart.

Nyland got some water. For an hour he worked over the man, not to save his life, but to restore him to consciousness only long enough to question him.

And at last his efforts were rewarded: the man opened his eyes, and they were swimming with the calm light of reason. He smiled faintly at Nyland.

"Got me," he said. "Well, I don't care a whole lot. There's just one thing that's been botherin' me since you come. Did you think somethin' was wrong in the house when you was tyin' your cayuse over there at the corral fence?"

At Nyland's nod he continued:

"I knowed it. It was the water, wasn't it—in the trough? I'm sure a damned fool for not thinkin' of that! So that was it? Well, you've got an eye in your head—I'll tell you that. I'm goin' to cash in, eh?"

Nyland nodded and the man sighed. He closed his eyes for an instant, but opened them slightly at Nyland's question:

"What did you do to Peggy? Where is she?"

The man was sinking fast, and it seemed that he hardly comprehended Nyland's question. The latter repeated it, and the man replied weakly:

"She's over in Okar—at Maison's—in his rooms. She——"

He closed his eyes and his lips, opening the latter again almost instantly to cough a crimson stream.

Nyland got up, his face chalk white. Standing beside the man he removed the two spent cartridges

from the cylinder of his pistol and replaced them with two loaded ones. Then he ran to his horse, tore the reins from the rail of the corral fence, mounted with the horse in a dead run, and raced toward Okar.

CHAPTER XXIX

NYLAND'S VENGEANCE

JUST before the dusk enveloped Okar, Banker Maison closed the desk in his private office and lit a cigar. He leaned back in the big desk chair, slowly smoking, a complacent smile on his lips, his eyes glowing with satisfaction.

For Maison's capacity for pleasure was entirely physical. He got more enjoyment out of a good dinner and a fragrant cigar than many intellectual men get out of the study of a literary masterpiece, or a philanthropist out of the contemplation of a charitable deed.

Maison did not delve into the soul of things. The effect of his greed on others he did not consider. That was selfishness, of course, but it was a satisfying selfishness.

It did not occur to him that Mary Bransford, for instance, or Sanderson—or anybody whom he robbed—could experience any emotion or passion over their losses. They might feel resentful, to be sure; but resentment could avail them little—and it didn't bring the dollars back to them.

He chuckled. He was thinking of the Bransfords now—and Sanderson. He had put a wolf on Sanderson's trail—he and Silverthorn; and Sanderson would soon cease to bother him.

He chuckled again; and he sat in the chair at the desk, hugely enjoying himself until the cigar was finished. Then he got up, locked the doors, and went upstairs.

Peggy Nyland had not recovered consciousness. The woman who was caring for the girl sat near an open window that looked out upon Okar's one street when Maison entered the room.

Maison asked her if there was any change; was told there was not. He stood for an instant at the window, mentally anathematizing Dale for bringing the girl to his rooms, and for keeping her there; then he dismissed the woman, who went down the stairs, opened the door that Maison had locked, and went outside.

He stood for an instant longer at the window; then he turned and looked down at Peggy, stretched out, still and white, on the bed.

Maison looked long at her, and decided it was not remarkable that Dale had become infatuated with Peggy, for the girl was handsome.

Maison had never bothered with women, and he yielded to a suspicion of sentiment as he looked

down at Peggy. But, as always, the sentiment was not spiritual.

Dale had intimated that the girl was his mistress. Well, he was bound to acknowledge that Dale had good taste in such matters, anyway.

The expression of Maison's face was not good to see; there was a glow in his eyes that, had Peggy seen it, would have frightened her.

And if Maison had been less interested in Peggy, and with his thoughts of Dale, he would have heard the slight sound at the door; he would have seen Ben Nyland standing there in the deepening dusk, his eyes aflame with the wild and bitter passions of a man who had come to kill.

Maison did not see, nor did he hear until Ben leaped for him. Then Maison heard him, felt his presence, and realized his danger.

He turned, intending to escape down the other stairway. He was too late.

Ben caught him midway between the bed and the door that opened to the stairway, and his big hands went around the banker's neck, cutting short his scream of terror and the incoherent mutterings which followed it.

Peggy Nyland had been suffering mental torture for ages, it seemed to her. Weird and grotesque

thoughts had followed one another in rapid succession through her brain. The thing had grown so vivid—the horrible imaginings had seemed so real, that many times she had been on the verge of screaming. Each time she tried to scream, however, she found that her jaws were tightly set, her teeth clenched, and she could get no sound through them.

Lately, though—it seemed that it had been for hours—she had felt a gradual lessening of the tension. Within the last few hours she had heard voices near her; had divined that persons were near her. But she had not been certain. That is, until within a few minutes.

Then it seemed to her that she heard some giant body threshing around near her; she heard a stifled scream and incoherent mutterings. The thing was so close, the thumping and threshing so real, that she started and sat up in bed, staring wildly around.

She saw on the floor near her two men. One had his hands buried in the other's throat, and the face of the latter was black and horribly bloated.

This scene, Peggy felt, was real, and again she tried to scream.

The effort was successful, though the sound was not loud. One of the men turned, and she knew him.

"Ben," she said in an awed, scared voice, "what in God's name are you doing?"

“Killin’ a snake!” he returned sullenly.

“Dale?” she inquired wildly. Her hands were clasped, the fingers working, twisting and untwisting.

“Maison,” he told her, his face dark with passion.

“Because of me! O, Ben! Maison has done nothing to me. It was Dale, Ben—Dale came to our place and attacked me. I felt him carrying me—taking me somewhere. This—this place——”

“Is Maison’s rooms,” Ben told her. In his eyes was a new passion; he knelt beside the bed and stroked the girl’s hair.

“Dale, you said—Dale. Dale hurt you? How?”

She told him, and he got up, a cold smile on his face.

“You feel better now, eh? You can be alone for a few minutes? I’ll send someone to you.”

He paid no attention to her objections, to her plea that she was afraid to be alone. He grinned at her, the grin that had been on his face when he had shot Dal Colton, and backed away from her until he reached the stairs.

Outside he mounted his horse and visited several saloons. There was no sign of Dale. In the City Hotel he came upon a man who told him that earlier in the day Dale had organized a posse and had gone to the Double A to arrest Sanderson. This man was

not a friend of Dale's, and one of the posse had told him of Dale's plan.

Nyland mounted his horse again and headed it for the neck of the basin. In his heart was the same lust that had been there while he had been riding toward Okar.

And in his soul was a rage that had not been sated by the death of the banker who, a few minutes before Nyland's arrival, had been so smugly reviewing the pleasurable incidents of his life.

CHAPTER XXX

THE LAW TAKES A HAND

BARNEY OWEN was tying the knot of the rope more securely when he heard the bolt on the pantry door shoot back. He wheeled swiftly, to see Mary Bransford emerging from the pantry, her hands covering her face in a vain endeavor to shut from sight the grisly horror she had confronted when she had reached her feet after recovering consciousness.

Evidently she had no knowledge of what had occurred, for when at a sound Owen made and she uncovered her eyes, she saw Owen and instantly fainted.

Owen dove forward and caught her as she fell, and then with a strength that was remarkable in his frail body he carried her to the lounge in the parlor.

He was compelled to leave her there momentarily, for he still entertained fears that Dale would escape the loop of the rope. So he ran into the pantry, looked keenly at Dale, saw that, to all appearances, he was in the last stages of strangulation, and then went out again, to return to Mary.

But before he left Dale he snatched the man's six-shooter from its sheath, for his own had been lost in the confusion of the rush of Dale's men for the door.

Mary was sitting up on the lounge when Owen returned. She was pale, and a haunting fear, cringing, abject, was in her eyes.

She got to her feet when she saw Owen and ran to him, crying.

Owen tried to comfort her, but his words were futile.

"You be brave, little woman!" he said. "You must be brave! Sanderson and the other men are in danger, and I've got to go to Okar for help!"

"I'll go with you," declared the girl. "I can't stay here—I won't. I can't stand being in the same house with—with that!" She pointed to the kitchen.

"All right," Owen said resignedly; "we'll both go. What did you do with the money?"

Mary disclosed the hiding place, and Owen took the money, carried it to the bunkhouse, where he stuffed it into the bottom of a tin food box. Then, hurriedly, he saddled and bridled two horses and led them to where Mary was waiting on the porch.

Mounting, they rode fast toward Okar—the little man's face working nervously, a great eagerness in

his heart to help the man for whom he had conceived a deep affection.

Banker Maison had made no mistake when he had told Sanderson that Judge Graney was honest. Graney looked honest. There was about him an atmosphere of straightforwardness that was unmistakable and convincing. It was because he was honest that a certain governor had sent him to Okar.

And Graney had vindicated the governor's faith in him. Whenever crime and dishonesty raised their heads in Okar, Judge Graney pinned them to the wall with the sword of justice, and called upon all men to come and look upon his deeds.

Maison, Silverthorn, and Dale—and others of their ilk—seldom called upon the judge for advice. They knew he did not deal in their kind. Through some underground channel they had secured a deputyship for Dale, and upon him they depended for whatever law they needed to further their schemes.

Judge Graney was fifty—the age of experience. He knew something of men himself. And on the night that Maison and Sanderson had come to him, he thought he had seen in Sanderson's eyes a cold menace, a threat, that meant nothing less than death for the banker, if the latter had refused to write the bill of sale.

For, of course, the judge knew that the banker was being forced to make out the bill of sale. He knew that from the cold determination and alert watchfulness in Sanderson's eyes; he saw it in the white nervousness of the banker.

And yet it was not his business to interfere, or to refuse to attest the signatures of the men. He had asked Maison to take the oath, and the banker had taken it.

Thus it seemed he had entered into the contract in good faith. If he had not, and there was something wrong about the deal, Maison had recourse to the law, and the judge would have aided him.

But nothing had come of it; Maison had said nothing, had lodged no complaint.

But the judge had kept the case in mind.

Late in the afternoon of the day on which Dale had organized the posse to go to the Double A, Judge Graney sat at his desk in the courtroom. The room was empty, except for a court attaché, who was industriously writing at a little desk in the rear of the room.

The Maison case was in the judge's mental vision, and he was wondering why the banker had not complained, when the sheriff of Colfax entered.

Graney smiled a welcome at him. "You don't get over this way very often, Warde, but when you

do, I'm glad to see you. Sit on the desk—that's your usual place, anyway."

Warde followed the suggestion about the desk; he sat on it, his legs dangling. There was a glint of doubt and anxiety in his eyes.

"What's wrong, Warde?" asked the judge.

"Plenty," declared Warde. "I've come to you for advice—and perhaps for some warrants. You recollect some time ago there was a herd of cattle lost in Devil's Hole—and some men. Some of the men were shot, and one or two of them went down under the herd when it stampeded."

"Yes," said the judge, "I heard rumors of it. But those things are not uncommon, and I haven't time to look them up unless the cases are brought formally to my attention."

"Well," resumed Warde, "at the time there didn't seem to be any clue to work on that would indicate who had done the killing. We've nothing to do with the stampede, of course—that sort of stuff is out of my line. But about the shooting of the men. I've got evidence now."

"Go ahead," directed the judge.

"Well, on the night of the killing two of my men were nosing around the level near Devil's Hole, trying to locate a horse thief who had been trailed to that section. They didn't find the horse thief, but

they saw a bunch of men sneaking around a camp fire that belonged to the outfit which was trailing the herd that went down in Devil's Hole.

"They didn't interfere, because they didn't know what was up. But they saw one of the men stampede the herd, and they saw the rest of them do the killing."

"Who did the killing?"

"Dale and his gang," declared the sheriff.

Judge Graney's eyes glowed. He sat erect and looked hard at the sheriff.

"Who is Sanderson?" he asked.

"That's the fellow who bossed the trail herd."

The judge smiled oddly. "There were three thousand head of cattle?"

Warde straightened. "How in hell do you know?" he demanded.

"Banker Maison paid for them," he said gently.

He related to Warde the incident of the visit of Sanderson and the banker, and the payment to Sanderson by Maison of the ninety thousand dollars.

At the conclusion of the recital Warde struck the desk with his fist.

"Damned if I didn't think it was something like that!" he declared. "But I wasn't going to make a holler until I was sure. But Sanderson knew, eh? He knew all the time who had done the killing, and

who had planned it. Game, eh? He was playing her a lone hand!"

The sheriff was silent for a moment, and then he spoke again, a glow of excitement in his eyes. "But there'll be hell to pay about this! If Sanderson took ninety thousand dollars away from Maison, Maison was sure to tell Dale and Silverthorn about it—for they're as thick as three in a bed. And none of them are the kind of men to stand for that kind of stuff from anybody—not even from a man like Sanderson!

"We've got to do something, Judge! Give me warrants for the three of them—Dale, Maison, and Silverthorn, and I'll run them in before they get a chance to hand Sanderson anything!"

Judge Graney called the busy clerk and gave him brief instructions. As the latter started toward his desk there was a sound at the door, and Barney Owen came in, breathing heavily.

Barney's eyes lighted when they rested upon the sheriff, for he had not hoped to see him there. He related to them what had happened at the Double A that day, and how Dale's men had followed Sanderson and the others to "wipe them out" if they could.

"That settles it!" declared the sheriff. He was outside in an instant, running here and there in

search of men to form a posse. He found them, scores of them; for in all communities where the law is represented, there are men who take pride in upholding it.

So it was with Okar. When the law-loving citizens of the town were told what had occurred they began to gather around the sheriff from all directions—all armed and eager. And yet it was long after dusk before the cavalcade of men turned their horses' heads toward the neck of the basin, to begin the long, hard ride over the plains to the spot where Sander-son, Williams, and the others had been ambushed by Dale's men.

A rumor came to the men, however, just before they started, which made several of them look at one another—for there had been those who had seen Ben Nyland riding down the street toward Maison's bank in the dusk, his face set and grim and a wild light in his eyes.

"Maison has been guzzled—he's deader than a salt mackerel!" came the word, leaping from lip to lip.

Sheriff Warde grinned. "Serves him right," he declared; "that's one less for us to hang!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE FUGITIVE

AFTER the departure of Barney Owen and Mary Bransford, the Double A ranchhouse was as silent as any house, supposed to be occupied by a dead man, could be.

But after a few minutes, if one had looked over the top of the partition from which Owen had hanged Alva Dale, one might have seen Dale move a little. One might have been frightened, but if one had stayed there, it would have been to see Dale move again.

The first time he moved he had merely placed his feet upon the floor, to rest himself. The second movement resulted in him raising his smashed hands and lifting the noose from his neck.

He threw it viciously from him after removing it, so that it flew over the top of the partition and swished sinuously upon the floor of the kitchen.

For Barney Owen had not done a good job in hanging Dale. For when Barney had run across the kitchen with the rope, to tie it to the fastenings of the door, it had slacked a little, enough to permit Dale's toes to touch the floor of the pantry.

Feeling the slack, Dale had taken advantage of it, throwing his head forward a little, to keep the rope taut while Owen fastened it. All that had been involuntary with Dale.

For, at that time Dale had had no thought of trying to fool Owen—he had merely taken what chance had given him. And when the first shock of the thing was over he had begun his attempts to reach the top of the partition in order to slacken the rope enough to get it over his head—for at that time he did not know that already the rope was slack enough.

It was not until after his hands had been smashed and he had dropped to the floor again, that he realized that he might have thrown the rope off at once.

Then it was too late for him to do anything, for he felt Owen above him, at the top of the partition, and he thought Owen had a gun. So he feigned strangulation, and Owen had been deceived.

And when Owen had entered the pantry, Dale still continued to feign strangulation, letting his body sag, and causing a real pressure on his neck. He dared not open his eyes to see if Owen had a weapon, for then the little man, having a gun, would have quickly finished the work that, seemingly, the rope had begun.

Dale might have drawn his own gun, taking a long chance of hitting Owen, but he was at a great disadvantage because of the condition of his hands, and he decided not to.

Dale heard Owen and Mary go out; he heard the clatter of hoofs as they rode away. Then he emerged from the pantry, and through a window watched the two as they rode down the slope of the basin.

Then Dale yielded to the bitter disappointment that oppressed him, and cursed profanely, going from room to room and vengefully kicking things out of his way while bandaging his smashed hands.

In the parlor he overturned the lounge and almost kicked it to pieces searching for the money Mary had told him was concealed there.

“The damned hussy!” he raged, when he realized that the money was not in the lounge.

He went out, got on his horse, and rode across the level back of the house, and up the slope leading to the mesa, where he had seen Sanderson riding earlier in the day.

For an hour he rode, warily, for he did not want to come upon Sanderson unawares—if his men had not intercepted his enemy; and then reaching the edge of a section of hilly country, he halted and sat motionless in the saddle.

For, from some distance ahead of him he heard

the reports of firearms, and over him, at the sound, swept a curious reluctance to go any farther in that direction.

For it seemed to him there was something forbidding in the sound; it was as though the sounds carried to him on the slight breeze were burdened with an evil portent; that they carried a threat and a warning.

He sat long there, undecided, vacillating. Then he shuddered, wheeled his horse, and sent him scampering over the back trail.

He rode to the Bar D. His men—the regular punchers—were working far down in the basin, and there was no one in the house.

He sat for hours alone in his office, waiting for news of the men he had sent after Sanderson; and as the interval of their absence grew longer the dark forebodings that had assailed him when within hearing distance of the firing seized him again—grew more depressing, and he sat, gripping the arms of his chair, a clammy perspiration stealing over him.

He shook off the feeling at last, and stood up, scowling.

“That’s what a man gets for givin’ up to a damn fool notion like that,” he said, thinking of the fear that had seized him while listening to the shooting. “Once a man lets on he’s afraid, the thing keeps

a workin' on him till he's certain sure he's a coward. Them boys didn't need me, anyway—they'll get Sanderson."

So he justified his lack of courage, and spent some hours reading. But at last the strain grew too great, and as the dusk came on he began to have thoughts of Dal Colton. Ben Nyland must have reached home by this time. Had Colton succeeded?

He thought of riding to Nyland's ranch, but he gave up that idea when he reasoned that perhaps Colton had failed, and in that case Nyland wouldn't be the most gentle person in the world to face on his own property.

If Colton had succeeded he would find him in Okar. So he mounted his horse and rode to Okar.

The town seemed to be deserted when he dismounted in front of the City Hotel. He did not go inside the building, merely looking in through one of the windows, and seeing a few men in there, playing cards in a listless manner. He did not see Colton.

He looked into several other windows. Colton was nowhere to be seen. In several places Dale inquired about him. No one had seen Colton that day.

No one said anything to Dale about what had happened. Perhaps they thought he knew. At any rate, Dale heard no word of what had transpired

during his absence. Men spoke to him, or nodded—and looked away, to look at him when his back was turned.

All this had its effect on Dale. He noted the restraint, he felt the atmosphere of strangeness. But he blamed it all on the queer premonition that had taken possession of his senses. It was not Okar that looked strange, nor the men, it was himself.

He went to the bank building and entered the rear door, clumping heavily up the stairs, for he felt a heavy depression. When he opened the door at the top of the stairs night had come. A kerosene lamp on a table in the room blinded him for an instant, and he stood, blinking at it.

When his eyes grew accustomed to the glare he saw Peggy Nyland sitting up in bed, looking at him.

She did not say anything, but continued to look at him. There was wonder in her eyes, and Dale saw it. It was wonder over Dale's visit—over his coming to Okar. Ben must have missed him, for Dale was alive! Dale could not have heard what had happened.

“You're better, eh?” said Dale.

She merely nodded her reply, and watched Dale as he crossed the room.

Reaching a door that led into another room, Dale turned.

“Where’s Maison?”

Peggy pointed at the door on whose threshold Dale stood.

Dale entered. What he saw in the room caused him to come out again, his face ashen.

“What’s happened?” he demanded hoarsely, stepping to the side of the bed and looking down at Peggy.

Peggy told him. The man’s face grew gray with the great fear that clutched him, and he stepped back; then came forward again, looking keenly at the girl as though he doubted her.

“Nyland killed him—choked him to death?” he said.

Peggy nodded silently. The cringing fear showing in the man’s eyes appalled her. She hated him, and he had done this thing to her, but she did not want the stigma of another killing on her brother’s name.

“Look here, Dale!” she said. “You’d better get out of here—and out of the country! Okar is all stirred up over what you have done. Sheriff Warde was in Okar and had a talk with Judge Graney. Warde knows who killed those men at Devil’s Hole, and he is going to hang them. You are one of them; but you won’t hang if Ben catches you. And he is looking for you! You’d better go—and go fast!”

For an instant Dale stood, looking at Peggy, searching her face and probing her eyes for signs that she was lying to him. He saw no such signs. Turning swiftly, he ran down the stairs, out into the street, and mounting, with his horse already running, he fled toward the basin and the Bar D.

He had yielded entirely to the presentiment of evil that had tortured him all day.

All his schemes and plots for the stealing of the Double A and Nyland's ranch were forgotten in the frenzy to escape that had taken possession of him, and he spurred his horse to its best efforts as he ran—away from Okar; as he fled from the vengeance of those forces which his evilness had aroused.

CHAPTER XXXII

WINNING A FIGHT

AFTER Sanderson shot the big man who had tried to rush him, there was a silence in the defile. Those of Dale's men who had positions of security held them, not exposing themselves to the deadly fire of Sanderson and the others.

For two hours Sanderson clung to his precarious position in the fissure, until his muscles ached with the strain and his eyes blurred because of the constant vigil. But he grimly held the place, knowing that upon him depended in a large measure the safety of the men on the opposite side of the defile.

The third hour was beginning when Sanderson saw a puff of smoke burst from behind a rock held by one of his men; he heard the crash of a pistol, and saw one of Dale's men flop into view from behind a rock near him.

Sanderson's smile was a tribute to the vigilance of his men. Evidently the Dale man, fearing Sanderson's inaction might mean that he was seeking a new position from where he could pick off more of his enemies, had shifted his own position so no part of his body was exposed to Sanderson.

He had wriggled around too far, and the shot from Sanderson's man had been the result.

The man was not dead; Sanderson could see him writhing. He was badly wounded, too, and Sanderson did not shoot, though he could have finished him.

But the incident drew Sanderson's attention to the possibilities of a new position. He had thought at first that he had climbed as high in the fissure as he dared without exposing himself to the fire of the Dale men; but examining the place again he saw that he might, with exceeding caution, take another position about twenty feet farther on.

He decided to try. Letting himself down until his feet struck a flat rock projection, he rested. Then, the weariness dispersed, he began to climb, shoving his rifle between his body and the cartridge belt around his waist.

It took him half an hour to reach the point he had decided upon, and by that time the sun had gone far down into the hazy western distance, and a glow—saffron and rose and violet—like a gauze curtain slowly descending—warned him that twilight was not far away.

Sanderson determined to finish the battle before the darkness could come to increase the hazard, and when he reached the spot in the fissure he hurriedly took note of the strategical points of the position.

There was not much concealment for his body. He was compelled to lie flat on his stomach to be certain that no portion of his body was exposed; and he found a place in a little depression at the edge of the fissure that seemed suitable. Then he raised his head above the little ridge that concealed him from his enemies.

He saw them all—every man of them. Some of them were crouching; some were lying prone—apparently resting; still others were sitting, their backs against their protection—waiting.

Sanderson took his rifle by the barrel and with the stock forced a channel through some rotted rock on the top of the little ridge that afforded him concealment. When he had dug the channel deeply enough—so that he could aim the weapon without exposing his head—he stuck the rifle barrel into the channel and shouted to the Dale men:

“This game is played out, boys! I’m behind you. You can’t hide any longer. I give you fair warning that if you don’t come out within a minute, throwin’ your guns away an’ holdin’ up your hands, I’ll pick you off, one by one! That goes!”

There was sincerity in Sanderson’s voice, but the men doubted. Sanderson saw them look around, but it was plain to him that they could not tell from which direction his voice came.

"Bluffin'!" scoffed a man who was in plain view of Sanderson; the very man, indeed, upon whom Sanderson had his rifle trained.

"Bluffin', eh?" replied Sanderson grimly. "I've got a bead on you. At the end of one minute—if you don't toss your guns away and step out, holdin' up your hands, I'll bore you—plenty!"

Half a minute passed and the man did not move. He was crouching, and his gaze swept the edge of the fissure from which Sanderson's voice seemed to come. His face was white, his eyes wide with the fear of death.

Just when it seemed that Sanderson must shoot to make his statement and threat convincing, the man shouted:

"This game's too certain—for me. I'm through!"

He threw his weapons away, so that they went bounding and clattering to the foot of the slope. Then he again faced the fissure, shouting:

"I know I've caved, an' you know I've caved. But what about them guys on the other side, there? They'll be blowin' me apart if I go to showin' myself."

Sanderson called to Williams and the others, telling them the men were going to surrender, and warning them to look out for treachery.

"If one of them tries any monkey-shines, nail him!" he ordered. "There's eleven of them that ain't been touched—an' some more that ain't as active as they might be. But they can bend a gun handy enough. Don't take any chances!"

Sanderson ordered the man to step out. He did so, gingerly, as though he expected to be shot. When he was in plain view of Sanderson's men, Sanderson ordered him to descend the slope and stand beside a huge rock ledge. He watched while the man descended; then he called to the others:

"Step up an' take your medicine! One at a time! Guns first. Williams!" he called. "You get their guns as fast as they come down. I'll see that none of them plug you while you're doin' it!"

There was no hitch in the surrender; and no attempt to shoot Williams. One by one the men dropped their weapons down the slope.

When all the men had reached the bottom of the defile Sanderson climbed down and asked the first man who had surrendered where they had left their horses. The animals were brought, and the men forced to mount them. Then, the Dale men riding ahead, Sanderson and the others behind, they began the return trip.

When they reached the open country above the defile, Sanderson rode close to Williams.

“There’s enough of you to take care of this gang,” he said, indicating the prisoners; “I’m goin’ to hit the breeze to the Double A an’ see what’s happened there!”

“Sure!” agreed Williams. “Beat it!”

When Streak got the word he leaped forward at a pace that gave Williams an idea of how he had gained his name. He flashed by the head of the moving columns and vanished into the growing darkness, running with long, swift, sure leaps that took him over the ground like a feather before a hurricane.

But fast as he went, he did not travel too rapidly for Sanderson. For in Sanderson’s heart also lurked a premonition of evil. But he did not fear it; it grimmed his lips, it made his eyes blaze with a wanton, savage fire; it filled his heart with a bitter passion to slay the man who had stayed behind at the Double A ranchhouse.

And he urged Streak to additional effort, heading him recklessly through sections of country where a stumble meant disaster, lifting him on the levels, and riding all the time with only one thought in mind—speed, speed, speed.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A MAN LEAVES OKAR

RIDING the hard trail through the basin, from its neck at Okar to the broad, upward slope that led to the Double A ranchhouse, came another man, who also was sacrificing everything to speed. His horse was fresh, and he spared it not at all as he swept in long, smooth, swift undulations over the floor of the basin.

Ben Nyland's lips were as straight and hard as were those of the other man who was racing toward the Double A from another direction; his face was as grim, and his thoughts were as bitter and savage.

When he reached the bottom of the long, gentle slope that stretched to the Double A ranchhouse he did not spare his horse. The terrible spurs sank in again and again, stirring the animal to a frenzy of effort, and he rushed up the slope as though it were a level, snorting with pain and fury, but holding the pace his rider demanded of him.

And when he reached the corral fence near the Double A ranchhouse, and his rider dismounted and ran forward, the horse heaved a sigh of relief and

stood, bracing his legs to keep from falling, his breath coming in terrific heaves.

An instant after his arrival Ben Nyland was inside the Double A ranchhouse, pistol in hand. He tore through the rooms in the darkness, stumbling over the furniture, knocking it hither and there as it interfered with his progress.

He found no one. Accidentally colliding with a table in the kitchen, he searched its top and discovered thereon a kerosene lamp. Lighting it with fingers that trembled, he looked around him.

There were signs of the confusion that had reigned during the day. He saw on the floor the rope that had encircled Dale's neck—one end of it was tied to the fastenings of the kitchen door.

The tied rope was a mystery to Nyland, but it suggested hanging to his thoughts, already lurid, and he leaped for the pantry. There he grimly viewed the wreck and turned away, muttering.

"He's been here an' gone," he said, meaning Dale; "them's his marks—ruin."

Blowing out the light he went to the front door, paused in it and then went out upon the porch, from where he could look northeastward at the edge of the mesa surmounting the big slope that merged into the floor of the basin.

Faintly outlined against the luminous dark blue

of the sky, he caught the leaping silhouette of a horse and rider. He grinned coldly, and stepped back into the shadow of the doorway.

"That's him, damn him!" he said. "He's comin' back!"

He had not long to wait. He saw the leaping silhouette disappear, seeming to sink into the earth, but he knew that horse and rider were descending the slope; that it would not be long before they would thunder up to the ranchhouse—and he gripped the butt of his gun until his fingers ached.

He saw a blot appear from the dark shadows of the slope and come rushing toward him. He could hear the heave and sob of the horse's breath as it ran, and in another instant the animal came to a sliding halt near the edge of the porch, the rider threw himself out of the saddle and ran forward.

At the first step taken by the man after he reached the porch edge, he was halted by Nyland's sharp:

"Hands up!"

And at the sound of the other's voice the newcomer cried out in astonishment:

"Ben Nyland! What in hell are you doin' here?"

"Lookin' for Dale," said the other, hoarsely. "Thought you was him, an' come pretty near borin' you. What saved you was a notion I had of wantin'

Dale to know what I was killin' him for! Pretty close, Deal!"

"Why do you want to kill him?"

"For what he done to Peggy—damn him! He sneaked into the house an' hurt her head, draggin' her to Okar—to Maison's. I've killed Maison, an' I'll kill him!"

"He ain't here, then—Dale ain't?" demanded Sanderson.

"They ain't nobody here," gruffly announced Nyland. "They've been here, an' gone. Dale, most likely. The house looks like a twister had struck it!"

Sanderson was inside before Nyland ceased speaking. He found the lamp, lit it, and looked around the interior, noting the partially destroyed lounge and the other wrecked furniture, strewn around the rooms. He went out again and met Nyland on the porch.

One look at Sanderson told Nyland what was in the latter's mind, and he said:

"He's at the Bar D, most likely. We'll get him!"

"I ain't takin' no chance of missin' him," Sanderson shot back at Nyland as they mounted their horses; "you fan it to Okar an' I'll head for his shack!"

Nyland's agreement to this plan was manifested

by his actions. He said nothing, but rode beside Sanderson for a mile or so, then he veered off and rode at an angle which would take him to the neck of the basin, while Sanderson, turning slightly northward, headed Streak for Dale's ranch.

Halfway between the Double A and the neck of the basin, Nyland came upon the sheriff and his posse. The posse halted Nyland, thinking he might be Dale, but upon discovering the error allowed the man to proceed—after he had told them that Sanderson was safe and was riding toward the Bar D. Sanderson, Nyland said, was after Dale. He did not say that he, too, wanted to see Dale.

"Dale!" mocked the sheriff, "Barney Owen hung him!"

"Dale's alive, an' in Okar—or somewhere!" Nyland flung back at them as he raced toward town.

"I reckon we might as well go back," said the sheriff to his men. "The clean-up has took place, an' it's all over—or Sanderson wouldn't be back. We'll go back to Okar an' have a talk with Silverthorn. An' mebbe, if Dale's around, we'll run into him."

The posse, led by the sheriff, returned to Okar. Within five minutes after his arrival in town the sheriff was confronting Silverthorn in the latter's office in the railroad station. The posse waited.

"It comes to this, Silverthorn," said the sheriff. "We ain't got any evidence that you had a hand in killing those men at Devil's Hole. But there ain't a man—an honest man—in town that ain't convinced that you did have a hand in it. What I want to say to you is this:

"Sanderson and Nyland are running maverick around the country tonight. Nyland has killed Maison and is hunting for Dale. Sanderson and his men have cleaned up the bunch of guys that went out this morning to wipe Sanderson out. And Sanderson is looking for Dale. And after he gets Dale he'll come for you, for he's seeing red, for sure.

"I ain't interfering. This is one of the times when the law don't see anything—and don't want to see anything. I won't touch Nyland for killing Maison, and I won't lay a finger on Sanderson if he shoots the gizzard out of you. There's a train out of here in fifteen minutes. I give you your chance—take the train or take your chance with Sanderson!"

"I'll take the train," declared Silverthorn.

Fifteen minutes later, white and scared, he was sitting in a coach, cringing far back into one of the seats, cursing, for it seemed to him that the train would never start.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A MAN GETS A SQUARE DEAL

DALE did not miss Ben Nyland by more than a few hundred yards as he passed through the neck of the basin. But the men could not see each other in the black shadows cast by the somber mountains that guarded the entrance to the basin, and so they sped on, one headed away from Okar and one toward it, each man nursing his bitter thoughts; one intent on killing and the other riding to escape the death that, he felt, was imminent.

Dale reached the Bar D and pulled the saddle and bridle from his horse. He caught up a fresh animal, threw saddle and bridle on him, and then ran into the house to get some things that he thought might be valuable to him.

He came out again, and nervously paused on the threshold of the door to listen.

A sound reached his ears—the heavy drumming of a horse's hoofs on the hard sand in the vicinity of the ranchhouse; and Dale gulped down his fear as he ran to his horse, threw himself into the saddle and raced around a corner of the house.

He had hardly vanished into the gloom of the night when another rider burst into view.

The second rider was Sanderson. He did not halt Streak at the door of the Bar D ranchhouse, for from a distance he had seen a man throw himself upon a horse and dash away, and he knew of no man in the basin, except Dale, who would find it necessary to run from his home in that fashion.

So he kept Streak in the dead run he had been in when approaching the house, and when he reached the corner around which Dale had vanished, he saw his man, two or three hundred yards ahead, flashing across a level toward the far side of the big basin.

He knew that Dale thought his pursuer was Nyland, and that thought gave Sanderson a grim joy. In Sanderson's mind was a picture of Dale's face—of the stark, naked astonishment that would be on it when he discovered that it was Sanderson and not Nyland who had caught him.

For Sanderson would catch him—he was convinced of that.

The conviction became strengthened when, after half an hour's run, Streak had pulled up on Dale. Sanderson could see that Dale's horse was running erratically; that it faltered on the slight rises that they came to now and then. And when Sanderson discovered that Dale's horse was failing, he urged

Streak to a faster pace. In an hour the space between the two riders had become less. They were climbing the long, gradual slope that led upward out of the basin when Dale's horse stumbled and fell, throwing Dale out of the saddle.

There was something horribly final in the manner of Dale's falling, for he tumbled heavily and lay perfectly quiet afterward. His horse, after rising, stumbled on a few steps and fell again.

Sanderson, fully alive to the danger of haste, rode slowly toward the fallen man. He was taking no chances, for Dale might be shamming in an effort to shoot Sanderson as he came forward.

But Dale was not shamming. Dismounting and drawing his pistol, Sanderson went forward. Dale did not move, and when at last Sanderson stood over the fallen man he saw that his eyes were closed and that a great gash had been cut in his forehead near the right temple.

Sanderson saw that the man was badly hurt, but to make sure of him he drew Dale's pistol from its sheath and searched his clothing for other weapons—finding another pistol in a pocket, and a knife in a belt. These he threw into some brush near by, and then he bent over the man.

Dale was unconscious, and despite all Sanderson could do, he remained so.

Sanderson examined the wound in his temple, and discovered that it was deep and ragged—such a wound as a jagged stone might make.

It was midnight when Sanderson ceased his efforts and decided that Dale would die. He pitied the man, but he felt no pang of regret, for Dale had brought his death upon himself. Sanderson wondered, standing there, looking down at Dale, whether he would have killed the man. He decided that he would have killed him.

“But that ain’t no reason why I should let him die after he’s had an accident,” he told himself. “I’ll get him to Okar—to the doctor. Then, after the doc patches him up—if he can—an’ I still think he needs killin’, I’ll do it.”

So he brought Dale’s horse near. The animal had had a long rest, and had regained his strength.

Sanderson bent to Dale and lifted his shoulders, so that he might get an arm under him, to carry him to his horse. But at the first movement Dale groaned and opened his eyes, looking directly into Sanderson’s.

“Don’t!” he said, “for God’s sake, don’t! You’ll break me apart! It’s my back—it’s broke. I’ve felt you workin’ around me for hours. But it won’t do any good—I’m done. I can feel myself goin’.”

Sanderson laid him down again and knelt beside him.

"You're Sanderson," said Dale, after a time. "I thought it was Nyland chasin' me for a while. Then I heard you talkin' to your horse an' I knew it was you. Why don't you kill me?"

"I reckon the Lord is doin' that," said Sanderson.

"Yes—He is. Well, the Lord ain't ever done anything for me."

He was silent for a moment. Then:

"I want to tell you somethin', Sanderson. I've tried to hate you, but I ain't never succeeded. I've admired you. I've cussed myself for doin' it, but I couldn't help it. An' because I couldn't hate you, I tried my best to do things that would make you hate me.

"I've deviled Mary Bransford because I thought it would stir you up. I don't care anything for her—it's Peggy Nyland that I like. Mebbe I'd have done the square thing to her—if I'd been let alone—an' if she'd have liked me. Peggy's better, ain't she? When I saw her after—after I saw Maison layin' there, choked to——"

"So you saw Maison—dead, you say?"

"Ben Nyland guzzled him," Dale's lips wreathed in a cynical smile. "Ben thought Maison had

brought Peggy to his rooms. You knowed Maison was dead?"

Sanderson nodded.

"Then you must have been to Okar." He groaned. "Where's Ben Nyland?"

"In Okar. He's lookin' for you." Sanderson leaned closer to the man and spoke sharply to him. "Look here, Dale; you were at the Double A. What has become of Mary Bransford?"

"She went away with Barney Owen—to Okar. Nobody hurt her," he said, as he saw Sanderson's eyes glow. "She's all right—she's with her brother."

He saw Sanderson's eyes; they were filled with an expression of incredulity; and a late moon, just showing its rim above the edge of the mesa above them, flooded the slope with a brilliancy that made it possible for Dale to see another expression in Sanderson's eyes—an expression which told him that Sanderson thought his mind was wandering.

He laughed, weakly.

"You think I'm loco, eh? Well, I ain't. Barney Owen ain't Barney Owen at all—he's Will Bransford. I found that out yesterday," he continued, soberly, as Sanderson looked quickly at him. "I had some men down to Tombstone way, lookin' him up.

"When old Bransford showed me the letter that

you took away from me, I knew Will Bransford was in Tombstone; an' when Mary sent that thousand to him I set a friend of mine—Gary Miller—onto him. Gary an' two of his friends salivated young Bransford, but he turned up, later, minus the money, in Tombstone. Another friend of mine sent me word—an' a description of him. Barney Owen is Bransford.

“Just what happened to Gary Miller an' his two friends has bothered me a heap,” went on Dale. “They was to come this way, to help me in this deal. But they never showed up.”

Sanderson smiled, and Dale's eyes gleamed.

“You know what's become of him!” he charged. “That's where you got that thousand you give to Mary Bransford—an' the papers, showin' that young Bransford was due here. Ain't it?”

“I ain't sayin',” said Sanderson.

“Well,” declared Dale, “Barney Owen is Will Bransford. The night Morley got him drunk we went the limit with Owen, an' he talked enough to make me suspicious. That's why I sent to Tombstone to find out how he looked. We had the evidence to show the court at Las Vegas. We was goin' to prove you wasn't young Bransford, an' then we was goin' to put Owen out of the——”

Dale gasped, caught his breath, and stiffened.

Sanderson stayed with him until the dawn, sitting quietly beside him until the end. Then Sanderson got up, threw the body on Dale's horse, mounted his own, and set out across the basin toward Okar.

CHAPTER XXXV

A DEAL IN LOVE

A FEW days later Mary Bransford, Sanderson, and Barney Owen were sitting on the porch of the Double A ranchhouse, near where they had sat on the day Mary and Owen and the Dale men had seen Sanderson riding along the edge of the mesa in his pursuit of Williams and the others.

Mary and Sanderson were sitting rather close together at one end of the porch; Barney Owen was sitting near them, on the porch edge, his elbows resting on his knees.

There had been a silence between the three for some time, but at last Sanderson broke it. He smiled at Mary.

"We'll build that dam—an' the irrigation plant now, mebbe," he said. "But it's goin' to be a big job. Williams says it will take a year, or more."

"There will be difficulties, too, I suppose," said Mary.

"Sure."

"But difficulties do not worry you," she went on, giving him a glowing look.

He blushed. "We promised each other not to refer to that again," he protested. "You are breaking your promise."

"I just can't help it!" she declared. "I feel so good over your victory. Why, it really wasn't your affair at all, and yet you came here, fought our fight for us; and then, when it is all over, you wish us to say nothing about it! That isn't fair!"

He grinned. "Was you fair?" he charged. "You told me the other day that you knew, the day after I ordered Dale away from the Double A—after tellin' you that I wasn't what I claimed to be—that Barney Owen wasn't Barney Owen at all, but your brother."

"An' you let me go on, not tellin' me. An' he didn't do a heap of talkin'. I ain't mentioned it until now, but I've wondered why? Barney knew from the first day that I wasn't what I pretended to be. Why didn't you tell me, Barney?"

Mary was blushing, and Barney's face was red. His eyes met Mary's and both pairs were lowered, guiltily.

Barney turned to Sanderson.

"Look at me!" he said. "Do I look like a man who could fight Dale, Silverthorn, and Maison—and the gang they had—with any hope of victory? When I got here—after escaping Gary Miller and

the others—I was all in—sick and weak. It didn't take me long to see how things were. But I knew I couldn't do anything.

“I was waiting, though, for Gary Miller and his friends to come, to claim the Double A. I would have killed them. But they didn't come. You came.

“At first I was not sure what to think of you. But I saw sympathy in your eyes when you looked at Mary, and when you told Dale that you were Will Bransford, I decided to keep silent. You looked capable, and when I saw that you were willing to fight for Mary, why—why—I just let you go. I—I was afraid that if I'd tell you who I was you'd throw up the whole deal. And so I didn't say anything.”

Sanderson grinned. “That's the reason you was so willin' to sign all the papers that wanted Will Bransford's signature. I sure was a boxhead for not tumblin' to that.”

He laughed, meeting Mary's gaze and holding it.

“Talkin' of throwin' up the deal,” he said. “That couldn't be. Dale an' Silverthorn an' Maison an' their gang of cutthroats couldn't make me give it up. There's only one person could make me do that. She'd only have to say that she don't think as much of me as I think she ought to. And then——”

"She'll keep pretty silent about that, I think," interrupted Owen, grinning at the girl's crimson face.

"I wouldn't be takin' your word for it," grinned Sanderson, "it wouldn't be reliable."

"Why—" began Mary, and looked at Owen.

"Sure," he laughed, "I'll go and take a walk. There are times when three can't explain a thing as well as two."

There was a silence following Owen's departure.

Then Mary looked shyly at Sanderson, who was watching her with a smile.

"Does it need any explaining?" she began. "Can't you see that——"

"Shucks, little girl," he said gently, as he leaned toward her, "words ain't—well, words ain't so awful important, are they?"

Apparently words were not important. For within the next few minutes there were few spoken. And progress was made without them. And then:

"I believe I never was so happy as when I saw you, that morning, coming in to Okar with Dale's body, and you said you had not killed him. And if Barney—Will, had killed him that day—if he had really hanged him, and Dale had died from it—I should have kept seeing Dale as he was hanging there all my life."

"It was Dale's day," said Sanderson.

"And Okar's!" declared the girl. "The town has taken on a new spirit since those men have left. And the whole basin has changed. Men are more interested and eager. There is an atmosphere of fellowship that was absent before. And, oh, Deal, how happy I am!"

"You ain't got anything on me!" grinned Sanderson.

And presently, looking toward the rim of the mesa, they saw Williams and his men coming toward them from Lazette, with many wagons, loaded with supplies and material for the new dam, forecasting a new day and a new prosperity for the Double A—and themselves.

"That's for a new deal," said Sanderson, watching the wagons and men.

"Wrong," she laughed, happily, "it is all for a 'Square' Deal!"

"All?" he returned, grinning at her.

"All," she repeated, snuggling close to him.



